Mastro Titta,

the Executioner of Rome

Memoirs of an Executioner,

written by himself

English version edited by Kelly Luck

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Introduction

It has often been said that life imitates art and vice-versa. After reading the memoirs of Giovanni Battista Bugatti, aka Mastro Titta—"Master of Justice"—I'm inclined to think that one can narrow it down further by culture. Certainly, if Signor Bugatti's memoirs are anything to go by, it may be said that life in Italy imitates opera. Within these pages you shall see any number of stories that could be right out of Verdi or Puccini. While there are the occasional bandits or other prosaic criminals, the majority of the book is a *grand guiginol* parade of jealousy, debauchery, and love gone wrong. And always, waiting in the wings, our Mastro Titta, ready to step out and deliver the finale.

I first came across the Mastro while reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* for the first time. In the book, some characters happen to witness a mazzatello (aka mazzolatura): that is, execution by being beaten to death with a club. Being curious, I hied me to Wikipedia to read up on it. There, I came across the following line:

"Giovanni Battista Bugatti (known as Mastro Titta), the famous executioner of the papal government, recalls in his memoirs that he used the 'mazzolato' on numerous condemned persons."

Well, naturally I had to have a look.

After some digging around I concluded that there were no English translations available. Consequentially, I dug around some more and found the Italian text. Now, I am no polyglot, but with the help of Google Translate I was able to cobble together a translation. While the machine did indeed do most of the heavy lifting, I (being mindful of what happens when you leave computer translation to its own devices) went through each line manually, ensuring clarity of translation, fixing grammatical awkwardness, etc. Therefore, while any errors in translation may be blamed on Google, any spelling/grammar issues may be laid entirely at my feet.

A word on currency: the currencies of pre-lira Italy were not terribly standard, with coins varying in value according to where they were minted, their weight, etc. I've tried to give context here and there but between swapping of standards, mix of Papal and non-Papal coins, the fact there were two different kinds of scudi, and so on, it rapidly becomes a headache. Persons interested in knowing more are referred to the "History of coins in Italy" entry in Wikipedia, which is most interesting.

Mastro Titta served as executioner from 1796 to 1865. During that time he served under six different popes and carried out 516 executions. The stories in this, his memoirs, are lurid, told with

evident relish. I think he understood his role in the great drama of life, and appreciated it. It is said he would offer snuff to his victims: a man with an instinct for the theatrical if ever there was one.

Dickens wrote about him in *Pictures from Italy*. Byron mentioned him in correspondence with his editor. His executions (almost always held in public) were generally well attended, and Mastro understood his audience very well indeed. As you are about to read, despite the grimness of his work, he certainly knew how to put on a show.

Curtain up!

Kelly M Luck
Kansas City, MO
April 19, 2026

Chapter I

I made my debut in my career as an executioner of His Holiness, traveling to Foligno to hang Nicola Gentilucci, a young man who, taken from jealousy, had first killed a priest and his coachman, then, upon being forced to go into hiding, two fat friars.

When I arrived in Foligno I began to know the first difficulties of the trade: I could not find anyone who wanted to sell me the timber necessary to raise the gallows and I had to go at night to break through the door of a warehouse to provide it. But this did not discourage me, and in four hours of assiduous work I had prepared the good gallows and the four stairs I needed.

Nicola Gentilucci meanwhile, over two hours of the night, after having his beard shaved and being made to dress in a clean white shirt and a pair of new trousers, was led with his wrists tightened by light handcuffs into the large municipal hall, since they wanted to give maximum solemnity to the execution, given the gravity of his crime—graver than any other—being the killing of a curate and two friars.

The company of White Penitents[i] in ceremonial dress, with hoods pulled down over their faces, lined up in two rows, awaited him from the door at the opposite end. A large crucifix had been placed in front of the door with two brothers on either side, and a group of religious people, invited to comfort the patient[ii].

The bargello[iii] and the policemen who led him, having reached the door of the room, knocked and it was opened. That scene deeply moved Gentilucci, but he nevertheless entered. As soon as he had taken a few steps, the bailiff, assistant to the chancellor, who bears his emblems, presented him with a card saying:

Nicola Gentilucci, I sentence you to death tomorrow morning.

The unkind "compliment" made such an impression upon the condemned man that he let the paper slip from his hand, and he himself would have fallen unconscious if his confessor and comforters had not supported him, who then led him to a nearby room where, lying on a mattress placed on the floor, they let him sleep.

Two hours before dawn the next day they woke him up to make him listen to mass: the confessor spoke to him and gave him the absolution and indulgence *in articulo mortis*[iv] that the Pope used to grant in such circumstances. Having confessed and communicated, the comforters prepared to acquit him. Gentilucci ate, drank and found himself somewhat refreshed.

Nonetheless, the confessor comforted him again, assuring him that he was on his way to heaven. The condemned man would perhaps have liked to postpone the journey for another half century, but assured that his happiness would only be postponed, he prepared to go cheerfully.

I introduced myself at that time and, taking off my hat, I respectfully offered Gentilucci a coin, as usual, to have a mass celebrated for his soul. Then, covering my head, I tied his hands and arms so that he could not make any movement, holding the ends in my hands from behind.

The Brotherhood of Death[v] opened the procession. The brothers wore their habit and had their faces covered. They chanted the Miserere[vi] in a dark tone. Then came the Blue Penitents, last the White Penitents to whom the place of honor was reserved: they also sang the same psalm in the same tone, following each other, so as not to interrupt each other, so that when some sang the others remained silent.

After the confraternities there were the bargelli of the nearby cities and the police in full uniform, and behind them was the patient, led to the ends of the rope by myself—humble but still radiant in such glory—surrounded by the comforters and the confessor.

Having arrived on the esplanade where the execution was to take place, Nicola Gentilucci was made to approach a small altar erected in front of the gallows and there he recited a final prayer. Then, getting up, I led him towards the gallows with his back to it, so that he wouldn't see it, and made him climb up one of the stairs, while I ascended another one very close by.

Having reached the required height, I passed two ropes around the patient's neck, already previously attached to the gallows: a larger and slower one, called the rescue rope, which was to be used if the smaller one, called the mortal rope, ever broke, because it is this which actually strangles the criminal. Meanwhile, the confessor and the comforters, having climbed the two side stairs, lavished their consoling words on him. The other comforters on their knees recited the Pater noster and the Ave Maria aloud and Gentilucci responded. But as soon as he had uttered the last Amen, with a masterly blow I threw him into space and jumped on his shoulders, strangling him perfectly and making the patient's body perform several elegant pirouettes.

The crowd was impressed by Nicola Gentilucci's severe, courageous and strong demeanor, no less than by the truly extraordinary dexterity with which I had given my first execution.

Having removed the corpse, I first severed its head from the torso and skewered it on the tip of a spear and raised it to the top of the gallows. Then with an ax I split his chest and abdomen, divided his body into four parts, with frankness and precision, as the most expert butcher could have done. I hung them on display around the scaffold, thus demonstrating truly exceptional cold blood and what was required of an executor, for his executions to be truly exemplary.

I was seventeen years old at the time, and my soul felt no emotion whatsoever. I have always believed that those who sin must atone; and it has always seemed to me in accordance with the dictates of reason and the criteria of justice that whoever kills must be killed.

A criminal is a broken member of society, which would gradually become corrupt if it did not suppress him. If we have a foot or hand that is wounded and cannot be healed, to prevent gangrene from spreading throughout the body, don't we amputate it? That's how it seems to me to be done with criminals. And although I am advanced in age and now close to giving my life to the Creator and appearing before his supreme tribunal, I feel no fear for what I have done: if need required it and my strength allowed it, I would go back to the beginning without hesitation, because I consider myself as the executor of the will of God, emanating from his representatives on earth.

After two months, minus eight days, I had to repeat my task and on 14 January 1797 I hanged in Amelia Sabatino Caramina who had committed a murder out of bestial fury and after seventy-four days, on 28 March 1797, I butchered and quartered Marco Rossi in Valentano who had killed his uncle and his cousin to take revenge for the unequal distribution made of a common inheritance.

They were gathered in the house when the argument broke out. The two victims tried to persuade the murderer of the incorrectness of his calculations and the unreasonableness of his demands. But Rossi didn't want to listen to reason and suddenly grabbed an axe, smashed his uncle's head, then repeated the action against his cousin, who fell dead at his feet, spraying him with his blood. Having come to his senses, he was horrified by his crime and went to hand himself over to the bargello. The trial was immediately erected against him and, condemned, he was handed over to me for execution, which he underwent resignedly, asking forgiveness from God and men for his misdeed.

The seventh day of August 1797 was one of the highlights in my life and long career. I had the honor of carrying out my duties for the first time in Rome, in Piazza del Popolo, in the presence of the most exalted ecclesiastical magistrates, illustrious figures of the Papal Court, ambassadors, ministers,

patricians and ladies of the highest lineage, hanging Giacomo Dell'Ascensione. He was a very dangerous shop burglar who, dedicating himself to this dangerous profession, had always managed to escape the investigations of the punitive justice and lead a cheerful, joyous and very happy life. But eventually he ended up falling into a trap set for him with very subtle art. Caught almost red-handed, he initially tried to resist, but then he wised up, allowed himself to be arrested and taken to prison, where he confessed to all his crimes.

Condemned, he objected to his sentence. He said that his crimes were not punishable by death, that the sentence was an abomination. And it took a lot of effort to get him tied to the cart. As I was about to get him up the ladder, he gave me such a terrible shove that I almost staggered. But this rude trait embittered me and without further compliments, having put the rope around his neck, I sent him to the other world, whence he may bring his complaints against the justice of Rome.

After four months of inaction I was sent to Iesi to hang, as in fact I hanged, on 30 October 1797, Pacifico Santinelli of that city, who, being detained in the prison, had killed the jailer and his wife. "Pacific" Santinelli was the personified antithesis of his name. Anything but Pacific! He looked like the devil! Tall and stocky, endowed with Herculean strength, he had practiced all the confessable and non-confessable professions. He was said to be a robber, but no one had ever been able to prove it. Arrested following a scuffle that took place one night in the square in which, to tell the truth, he had not taken any active part, attempts were made to detain him as long as possible, in order to carry out investigations into his account and get to the bottom of the accusations made against him. It was hoped that his detention would encourage witnesses to testify against him. But, whether he had not actually committed the crimes attributed to him, or whether the fear he inspired was truly such that it paralyzed the tongue of those who could have compromised him, all attempts came to nothing.

Pacifico Santinelli, meanwhile, became horribly impatient and kept telling his jailer that if the door wasn't opened for him one day or another he would strangle him with his own hands.

And, unfortunately, he kept his word.

The poor jailer entered his cell one morning and found him very agitated. He had spent a sleepless night making the most sinister plans.

"Pacifico," the jailer said to him jokingly, thinking he was making friends with him, "So don't you intend to make peace with justice?"

"I would strangle justice, as I will strangle you, its representative and minister, if you don't open the door for me."

"Are you in the mood to laugh, Santinelli?"

"No."

"Yet to hear you, one would believe so."

"What?"

"Didn't you say you want to go out today?"

"I said it and I will do it."

"Who will open the door for you?"

"The keys."

"They are too well placed," continued the jailer, shaking the bunch of keys that he carried suspended from his waist.

"Do you believe so?" Santinelli asked him, increasingly grim and threatening, with a strange accent.

"I'm sure of it."

"We'll see."

Saying this, the prisoner, with a panther leap, was on top of the jailer and grabbed him by the throat and threw him onto the floor. The jailer tried to get up, with a sudden movement, but Pacifico placed a knee on his chest and tightened his hands around his neck.

The patient's veins swelled horribly; his face had become purple, then almost black; his eyes popped out of their sockets; his tongue stuck out three-quarters of his mouth. And therefore he was no longer resisting.

But at that moment a noise was heard outside and Pacifico Santinelli with a supreme effort managed to strangle the unfortunate jailer, who, when he released his hands, had surrendered his soul to God.

The external noise that had hastened the catastrophe came from the steps of the jailer's wife who, worried about her husband's prolonged absence and the threats she had heard uttered by the prisoner, moved to investigate.

As soon as she poked her head into the cell, Pacifico grabbed her and brutally overturned her on her husband's corpse, leading her to the same end as him, strangling her and crushing her chest with his knees.

Then taking the keys from the jailer's belt, he fled, pulling the cell door behind him. He hoped he could hide in some dark corner until the right moment came for escape. But after a few steps he

encountered a group of policemen who were escorting another prisoner: he was immediately recognized and arrested. Once the crime was discovered, the judgment was held and the criminal's denials did not hold up for long against the clear evidence. Sentenced to hanging and entrusted to my hands, he underwent it courageously, confessing that he deserved it, adding: "Perhaps my victims will pray in Heaven for me, revenge and resentment do not cross the borders of the kingdom of death".

Chapter II

No less difficult a matter for me was the execution of the killers of the priest Don Giovanni Lupini, which I had to carry out on 6 May 1800, which caused a huge stir in Rome at that time. Don Giovanni lived with a servant and a niece in an elegant house halfway up the Monte Mario hill. He was a very wealthy man, he loved generous wine and good food. Evil tongues whispered that he was not insensitive even to the seductions of the fair sex and argued this perhaps from the fact that Tota, his maid, was a strong, sanguine piece of a girl, very appetizing. But since the niece was kept at home, it seems to me that all suspicion should be removed. He celebrated his first mass in the Church of Monte Mario and no longer cared about religious practices; much less of ecclesiastical offices. And this contributed to alienating him from the sympathies of the Curia, which had several times reminded him to strictly observe the Council of Trent, which prescribes that priests should not keep women under the age of forty in their homes.

"My niece, Bettina, is nineteen, my servant Tota is twenty-one, and between the two of them they add up to forty years: they are within the law." This is how the good priest reasoned.

Don Giovanni had already several times observed some suspicous men wandering near his little house, but he hadn't been concerned. His house was well equipped with solid shutters: he had a great dane who barked frighteningly at the slightest noise; he had good weapons; and near it stood a rustic building, inhabited by two families of farmers employed by him, which included some robust young men. He therefore believed that he did not have to fear any surprise. Now it happened that one of his sisters, an old spinster from whom he hoped to inherit, had fallen ill in the city, and to ingratiate himself he sent his niece and her servant to take care of her. The latter he truly would have kept with him, but since it was only a few days, he resigned himself to giving her up.

The night following the departure of the two women, Don Giovanni Lupini, after having had a lavish dinner served at the table by one of his peasant women, and copiously drunk the sparkling wine from his Monte Mario vineyards, went to bed. He was still immersed in his first sleep, heavy and hard, when he felt two powerful hands clasp his throat: he tried to shout, but the word died in his strangulation and after two or three gasps, he lay a stiff corpse in his bed. And so his farmers found him the next morning, who, seeing the door open, entered, believing the women had returned, to say good

morning. But as soon as they entered the courtyard and saw the great dane lying on the ground, they were seized by sinister suspicions and hurried to the master's room.

The whole house had been turned upside down: the wardrobes, the chests and the chest where Don Giovanni used to store his money had been forced open. The pantry was robbed and on the kitchen table were the miserable leftovers of a gargantuan meal that the thieves had prepared. What more? A very strong smell of wine rose from the cellar. When they went down, they found that before leaving, the criminals had opened the barrels and let the contents drip to the ground, thus dispersing that grace of God, which they had not been able to take away. Notifying the authorities, the house was immediately dutifully visited by their representatives, who probably took what the thieves had forgotten. Then the investigations began.

It became known that a grocer from Borgo had purchased some caciocavalli[vii] and hams which were supposed to be part of the theft. Following this lead, the following were arrested: Gioacchino Lucarelli, Luigi De Angelis, Lorenzo Robotti, Giovanni Rocchi and Antonio Mauro, who were found in possession of more money than their position would explain and whose origin they were unable to justify. Torture opened the mouth of Lucarelli, who confessed that during the day he had penetrated the garden wall, that he had thrown a poisoned meatball at the great dane, towards evening, which put him out, and when the priest had gone to bed, that he had brought his companions into the house. The skein of the crime was thus quickly unraveled. The criminals were all condemned to the gallows, then to have their heads and arms cut off, to be exposed, for example, on the Porta Angelica, and Lucarelli and De Angelis to be, moreover, burned.

The execution took place in Ponte and did not offer any notable incidents. They really seemed born for the gallows. They set off there with the utmost indifference. While I hanged one, the others watched as spectators without batting an eyelid. One would have said that it had nothing to do with them. When I had strangled them all, I had to, with the help of only my boy, detach them all from the gallows. Then the carnage began. The stage seemed transformed into a butcher's shop. Having finished this operation and placed the heads and arms in the basket, we lit the pyre raised for this purpose and burned the bloody remains of Lucarelli and De Angelis. The vapors that developed from that burning flesh rose whitish and spread a nauseating stench.

To raise our heads and arms on Porta Angelica, however, we had to wait for night, because the authorities thought it would be too dangerous to have the crowd present for it. At dawn the following day, the burrini[viii] who entered from Porta Angelica, seeing the grim spectacle of those heads severed

and fixed to the top, livid and contracted, were gripped by a sense of terror, and many turned back and fled, as if they were afraid of having to meet the same end.

However, once the matter became known in the city, there was an endless rush of people. In short, all the taverns in the area were overflowing with curious people, who were having fun, joy and happiness, as if they were attending a party. The strong Roman fiber did not contradict itself. Everyone was convinced that the sentence had been just and not believing that criminals of this kind deserved any mercy, they were satisfied with the justice carried out and celebrated it. However, we would like to add that the splendid spring day added excitement to that almost processional trip. As for me, Monsignor Fiscale wanted to show me his satisfaction for the fivefold execution so well executed and he lavished on me an extraordinary gratification. I think, after all, I well deserved it. But it wasn't finished yet.

By secret revelation the court learned that the organizer of the crime and the one who had reaped the greatest profit had been a certain Bernardino Bernardi, because the criminals had not had time to divide up all the loot, which had been placed in one of his houses outside the Porta San Sebastiano. As soon as they were informed of this, the authorities had Bernardino Bernardi arrested and his house searched, where most of the valuables stolen from Don Giovanni Lupini were found. Proceedings were also instituted against him who, faced with the irrefutable evidence accusing him, confessed and was sentenced to the gallows and quartering, which I carried out two months later, exposing his head severed from the torso and his arms at the Porta San Sebastiano. But the interest had already dried up since the previous performance and this one went almost unnoticed.

Chapter III

The year 1801 was fruitful for me with work right from the start, since I began by hanging and quartering three of them on January 19th and eight days later I had to repeat the same operation on four criminals. Let's proceed in order. For some time now the attacks on public couriers and private cars on the roads leading to Rome had become very frequent and increasingly daring. But no matter how many investigations were carried out, it was never possible to discover those responsible nor to have any traces of them. The existence of a gang of robbers was supposed, which would gather to carry out crimes, then disband and return its members to their usual jobs in the fields or to other functions. The most expert explorers had been sent to the surrounding countryside and towns; but no matter how much they searched the former and tried to gather information from the former, they came up with nothing. One fine morning the news reached Rome of a robbery suffered on the road from Baccano to Calcata, by a Neapolitan colonel, who was going to Ancona on diplomatic business, equipped with credentials from his Sovereign, and accompanied by his brother and a servant. This was how it happened.

About a mile from the Osteria del Pavone[ix], near Baccano, when the carriage arriving carrying the colonel and his men, three individuals emerged from a hedge. The one who seemed to be the leader stopped the horses and ordered the driver to get off the box. In the meantime, two other beardless young men showed up at the wooden counters and, leveling their rifles, ordered the travelers to hand over the money and precious objects they had. The colonel, who was holding a considerable sum of silver in his chest and wished to save it, turned to the robbers and told them:

"I don't have any money on me, search the drawer of the carriage and you will find some." The robbers did so and took five or six copper shields; but then they realized that the colonel had a hand over his chest and that it was bulging.

"Give me that money you're trying to hide in your chest or I'll kill you," the gang leader ordered him, leveling the pistol he was armed with at him.

The frightened colonel then took from the chest pocket of his suit about fifty scudi[x] that he was holding and handed them over to the robbers, who also took away his three-cornered hat braided with gold, with a tassel of the same metal, on which was the initials F. R. (Ferdinand Rex). They took away a few coins, shoe buckles and a silk slip he was wearing from his brother. They even took away the few

coins he had from the carrier who drove the carriage. The servant, however, was left alone. They probably predicted that he didn't have a penny. Then they were left to continue their journey.

Once in Baccano, the colonel immediately sent a report of the incident to the governor of Monte Rosi and he forwarded it to the central government in Rome, who ordered a bargello to leave with some country police for the scene of the crime, which was immediately done. Once the bargello arrived in Calcata, it became known that that same night, two other attacks had been committed, evidently by the same gang. The first against the conductor of the postal carriage between Rome and Guarcino, from whom a few paoli had been taken; the second against some muleteers, from whom the ironworks and the things they had in their bags and the little money had been taken away; and from one of them the gold buttons he wore in his ears, from another his new shoes. Having gathered some information, the bargello with his cops immediately went to arrest his colleague in Calcata, the town's bargello, who enjoyed a terrible reputation and was suspected of having stolen a mule from the Calcata pharmacist at night, which was then sent to be sold in Piazza Montanara in Rome by his accomplices. And with the bargello of Calcata, Giuseppe Zuccherini, arrested two guards employed by him, Giuseppe Sfreddi, Roman, already wanted for other crimes, and Giacomo D'Andrea, Venetian, an unemployed baker, and like the other hired into service by Zuccherini.

The country bargello found the above-mentioned in possession of a pouch, containing all the stolen money. But in the interrogation that those arrested underwent in Calcata, they said that they had taken that bag that same night from three robbers, surprised on the road, with whom they had scuffled, and who had then fled, leaving the bag on the ground. As for the muleteer's new shoes, which D'Andrea had put on, he apologized by saying that since he was unable to walk in his own, they were so broken and battered, he had temporarily taken those from his saddlebag. Taken to Rome and subjected to further interrogations, D'Andrea, a young man of just twenty, confessed everything: the others flatly denied it. But it was a vain effort. Convinced of the crime, they were sentenced to the gallows and quartering, also to give satisfaction to the king of Naples, Ferdinand of Bourbon, who was clamoring to have it.

It is impossible to describe the density of the crowd, which had gathered in Piazza del Popolo on the morning of January 19, 1801, when I carried out the sentence. Once we got off the cart with the comforters, the people surrounded us on all sides and the soldiers could barely open the way for us to climb onto the platform of the stage. But the condemned men were solidly tied with their hands behind their backs: the Capuchins were around them and any attempt to escape would have been in vain. It

would be useless to repeat the details of the performance, which offered no variety. They died courageously and Christianly, after having asked for forgiveness for their crimes. And this, as always happens, won them the sympathy of the crowd, who admired their frank demeanor.

"What a shame," they (especially the women) murmured, "so young!"

Their remains remained hanging from the stage all day. Only during the night were they withdrawn and the scaffold was demolished.

Chapter IV

The second execution entrusted to me during that month of January 1801 took place on the 27th in Camerino, involving four individuals—namely, Luigi Puerio, Ermenegildo Scani, Gaetano Lideri, and Leonardo Ferranti—as I have previously noted. The case involved yet another highway robbery.

These men had formed a gang and roamed the countryside surrounding Camerino, attacking public and private carriages, hapless travelers, and even the mail coaches. On the night of the Epiphany[xi]—after having already committed two petty robberies of little consequence, relieving some carters of a few scudi and a muleteer of a small load of provisions—they were retreating into the brushwood. Their intention was to cover their tracks in the event that their victims—disregarding the bandits' threats and death warnings—should happen to report them to the authorities.

It was then that they heard, coming from the main road, the jingling bells of a team of post-horses drawing a post-chaise. They immediately returned to the edge of the thicket and saw an elegant traveling carriage approaching at a brisk trot; it was drawn by four horses, ridden by two postilions in full dress uniform, with two servants seated behind them in elaborate livery trimmed with gold braid. They conferred briefly on a course of action, and within two minutes, they had reached a decision. The stakes were high and the undertaking perilous, yet it promised to be highly lucrative, and so they resolved to take the gamble. They took up their positions along the road, and the moment the carriage drew near, they discharged their pistols—the only weapons with which they were armed—directly at it.

The vehicle came to a sudden, jarring halt, for the two lead horses had been wounded and collapsed, dragging the first postilion—who had also been struck—down beneath them. The second postilion instantly leaped to the ground and attempted to sever the harness of the lead pair in order to free the second team, in the desperate hope that he might yet escape with them. But the bandits were upon him in a single bound; they bound him securely and threw him to the side of the road. Meanwhile, heart-rending female screams were issuing from inside the carriage. The two servants, paralyzed with fear, remained motionless.

"Get them down and bind them," said the leader, Luigi Puerio, to Leonardo Ferranti and Gaetano Lideri. "And you, Scani—secure the other postilion."

To make short work of it, the latter smashed the man’s skull with a saddle pistol he wore tucked into his belt.

"You imbecile!" Puerio shouted at him, turning toward the sound of the shot as he approached the carriage door.

Ermenegildo Scani shrugged nonchalantly and set about rifling through the dead postilion's pockets, while Lideri and Ferranti did the same to the bound postilion and the two servants, whom they had pinned against a large tree and lashed to its trunk.

"Fools! Don't waste time on trifles," the bandit leader thundered again. "Detach the luggage from the back of the carriage and search it."

No sound could be heard from the carriage any longer. Puerio approached the door, opened it, and beheld a beautiful, elegant lady who had fainted. This allowed him to work at his leisure, removing the diamond earrings and the rich jewelry she was wearing. Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the edge of the thicket, laying her down with the utmost delicacy upon a soft velvet rug, one that seemed made expressly to cushion her against the roughness of the ground. Around her neck, the beautiful lady wore a slender Venetian gold chain, the ends of which disappeared beneath her bodice, perhaps supporting a locket or medallion. Puerio—young and of genteel background—wished to show himself courteous; kneeling on one knee, he set about unlacing her gown. Yet, as the task proceeded, he felt his senses ignite, and ideas far removed from mere theft began to swirl through his mind. The intoxicating perfumes wafting from the lady's bodice made his head spin; and when her fair bosom—freed from its confines—rose up, towering and fragrant amidst the frothy lace adorning her chemise, he leaned over her and pressed a kiss upon it, intoxicated by passion and desire. At the touch of those lips, burning like embers, the lady revived; glancing around as if waking from a dream, she realized the terrible predicament in which she found herself.

"What do you want from me?" she asked the brigand, speaking with a distinct foreign accent.

"Nothing," Puerio replied, his voice barely a whisper, his eyes blazing.

"Have you, then, already taken everything?"

"Nothing," the brigand repeated, his voice trembling with the sensual delirium that held him in its thrall.

"Then let me go!" the lady retorted; having fully regained her faculties, she now clearly perceived the bandit's intentions.

"Nothing... save for love!" Puerio hissed in her ear, his burning breath almost scorching her skin.

"Love!" the woman exclaimed with such profound sarcasm that the brigand felt his blood run cold. "Do the likes of you, then, even know what that is?"

The last vestiges of his former chivalrous nature vanished from Puerio at that sinister tone; he reverted instantly to being both brigand and beast, inflamed by an uncontrollable lust for gratification.

"You'll see if I know how," he growled in a hoarse voice, encircling her waist and forcing her back down onto the moss (from which she had half-risen) while attempting to thrust a knee between her legs and plant a kiss upon her lips.

At this brutal outrage, the lady—who perhaps, for a fleeting moment, had succumbed to the allure of that frenzied passion, and to the influence of the hour, the place, and the situation—suddenly regained all her composure, her strength, and her haughty disdain. Just as the brigand attempted to press his lips against hers, she spat full in his face, striking Luigi Puerio squarely. The bandit sprang to his feet, brandished a small dagger he wore at his side, and plunged it into the throat of the unfortunate lady, who slumped back to the ground, drenched in the blood that gushed in torrents from her wound. The blade of the stiletto had severed her carotid artery clean through.

Luigi Puerio heaved a sigh of satisfaction from the very depths of his chest. His vengeance for that atrocious insult had been so swift, so lightning-fast, that he felt an ineffable joy. Had he achieved the very thing he had craved above all else in the world just moments before—that woman's embrace—he could not have felt happier. Suddenly, he froze, appearing to strain his ears toward a distant sound; unable to identify it, he threw himself flat upon the road, pressing his ear directly against the earth. After a few seconds, he sprang back up and, calling out to his companions, shouted:

"Quick! Hurry! The sound of hooves is heard—at least five horses: it is a patrol that will be here in less than ten minutes."

The brigands hastened to stuff the loot stolen from the carriage into the large saddlebags with which they were equipped, and, together with their leader, plunged into the depths of the forest.

Unfortunately for them, the murdered woman was a Spanish princess, the wife of an attaché to His Catholic Majesty's embassy to the Holy See. Upon being notified, the government unleashed a swarm of constables and agents throughout the thickets of the surrounding countryside; gradually tightening the cordon they had formed, they eventually succeeded in capturing the four highwaymen not far from the scene of their latest crime.

The trial took place in Camerino. The testimonies of the two servants and the postilion reconstructed the event in its entirety and down to its minutest details, such that the accomplices

eventually all confessed. Only Puerio persisted in his denials. But in the end, he was forced to yield in the face of overwhelming evidence and, like his companions, was sentenced to be hanged and quartered.

Summoned to carry out the execution, I managed to complete the task, though not without difficulty for, as invariably happens in the provinces, the necessary materials to erect the scaffold and the four required gallows were initially withheld from me. I was forced to seize them by force—escorted by constables and under cover of night—from a timber yard. By dawn on January 27th, however, everything was ready. I proceeded to the prison, where the condemned men were handed over to me; I had them loaded into the cart, securely handcuffed and bound together in pairs. Luigi Puerio spurned the spiritual comforters and ascended the scaffold with an intrepid stride; he met his end well: without cowardice and without affectation. His accomplices, by contrast, were utterly broken. It was not so much the rope that extinguished their lives, but rather the terror of the gallows. Nevertheless, I conducted myself in such a manner that the public remained unaware of this, for, by virtue of a most ancient tradition, it is held that neither the dead, nor the dying, nor the infirm of any kind may be put to death.

Witnessing this act of justice of mine were the Spanish Ambassador and a host of diplomats from other nations; for the Princess was widely known and well-beloved, and the circumstances surrounding her assassination had given rise to endless speculation. Arriving in Camerino alongside the diplomats and the Spanish Ambassador came, too, a multitude of Roman noblemen and dignitaries, among them His Eminence the Cardinal, Secretary of State. This was one of the most solemn executions I ever carried out.

Chapter V

The Puerio affair calls to mind another crime, one in which erotic frenzy, the lust for sensual gratification, played a pivotal role, and which ultimately delivered the culprit into my hands. And since my memory serves me so remarkably well at this moment—recalling even the most minute details—I shall interrupt the chronological order of my executions to recount and describe it here. In the early years of the century, there lived in Città di Castello a certain Francesco Conti: a strapping young man hailing from a local farming family—prosperous, though not wealthy—who would send their produce (vegetables, fruit, and various other foodstuffs) into the city to be sold. Francesco, who possessed dissolute habits and had little love for country life, prevailed upon his family to let him move to the city and open a shop to retail their wares. And there, he began to give himself over to revelry and to cultivate associations with scoundrels and ruffians of every stripe.

Among the regular patrons of Conti's shop was a most charming young woman—motherless, and entrusted by her father with the management of their household—named Elvira Fontana. She would go shopping every day, accompanied by a maidservant, and often lingered to converse with Conti, a handsome young man of Herculean build, with a pale olive complexion, blazing black eyes, and full, sensual lips, between which, when he smiled, one could glimpse small, white teeth. The shopkeeper's playful wit, cheerful banter, and courteous manners appealed to the young woman; yet she was far from suspecting the strange thoughts he harbored in his mind as he cast his covetous gaze upon her; and she was indeed taken aback when Francesco, moving beyond mere customary compliments, shifted to expressions of a far more explicit and direct nature. One day, while the maidservant had stepped out of the shop on some incidental errand, Conti drew Elvira under a pretext to the back of the shop and, encircling her waist with both arms, kissed her again and again, frenetically, upon the lips, saying:

"I love you! I love you, and you must be mine at any cost."

The maidservant returned just in time and failed to notice (or perhaps chose not to notice) the blush that crimsoned the young girl's cheeks. The very next day, Elvira dismissed her gardener and never again returned to Francesco Conti; yet she took great care not to recount the incident to anyone. The audacious young man attempted to approach her once more; but, having failed to do so, he resigned himself to the outcome and plunged ever deeper into his reckless lifestyle.

Before long, he sank so low that he joined a gang of thieves, with whom he burgled homes and shops by night. One night, accompanied by five accomplices, he broke into a stately mansion where, he had been told, a rich haul awaited them. As they prowled through the apartments in the dark, they spotted a slender beam of light filtering through the cracks of a door. They entered. It was a bedroom, where Elvira Fontana lay sleeping, her attire disarrayed. At the sight of such a voluptuous creature, Francesco Conti was seized by a sort of erotic frenzy that stripped him of all reason. Forgetting his accomplices and the very purpose that had brought them to that house, he thought of nothing but making the girl his own, overpowering her courageous resistance.

Drawn by the cries of the wretched girl—which Conti strove in vain to stifle—her father and an elderly servant rushed to the scene; yet they could do nothing to defend her, for the other bandits held them at bay until the horrific crime had been consummated. Nor did it end there: Conti's five accomplices, too, demanded to possess the unfortunate young woman, who thus became the plaything of them all, right before her father's very eyes. It was just beginning to dawn when the vile rabble abandoned their prey; there was no time to lose. They bound the father and the servant, and rummaging hastily as time was pressing, they managed to find nothing more than about thirty scudi, with which they fled the scene of their sordid deeds. Francesco Conti returned to his shop as if he had done absolutely nothing amiss; there, following a formal complaint lodged by Fontana, he was arrested at dusk.

Upon being brought to trial, he initially attempted to deny the charges; however, Elvira's testimony was damning, and he began by confessing to the rape of the young girl, though he maintained that he had not been part of the gang that subsequently abused her and stole the thirty scudi. On this point, he remained adamant. All attempts to induce him to reveal the names of his accomplices proved futile. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to the gallows, without any further aggravation of the penalty, and I hanged him in Città di Castello on the morning of April 26, 1803, after he had made a thorough confession and received religious consolation, having shown himself to be truly repentant for his crime. He died courageously; his body was immediately claimed by his relatives and transported back to his hometown, where he was given an honorable burial.

Chapter VI

Following the four men from Camerino who had robbed and murdered a Spanish princess on February 9, 1801, I carried out my twenty-eighth execution by hanging and quartering Teodoro Cacciona in Piazza del Popolo; he had been condemned for stealing a cloak, a pair of boots, and twelve scudi from a cart driver. Five days later, I had to travel to Albano, where, on February 14, 1801, I was called upon to bludgeon and quarter a certain Fabio Valeri, who had robbed a provision dealer from Ariccia. The following week, I proceeded to Viterbo, where, on February 21, 1801, I was required to hang and quarter Francesco Pretolani, who had robbed and killed an innkeeper and his wife. After a four-month respite, on June 6, 1801, in Piazza del Popolo in Rome, I hanged Giovanni Fabrini, who had committed a revenge killing in the district of La Pace. There are no details worthy of note regarding either the crimes or the executions of any of these men. They were common malefactors who, perishing at my hand, received the just recompense for their wicked deeds; they departed for the next world fully convinced that they had to settle their account with justice without giving way to excessive despair, and resigning themselves to their fate. To them, dying on the gallows was no different than dying in their beds.

Far more interesting—and eminently dramatic—was the trial of Domenico Treca; following a court verdict condemning him to the gallows, I was summoned to Subiaco to hang him, a task I duly performed on the morning of July 4, 1801. Domenico Treca was a young man who earned his living as an itinerant haberdasher, traveling from village to village and frequenting local markets and fairs. He earned a comfortable living, and he lavished all his money upon his wife, whom he loved with unbridled devotion, and who well deserved such love for her incomparable beauty.

Her name was Felicita, and she was endowed with a truly striking physique: voluptuous in form yet graceful, with a towering bosom, powerful hips, arms that were shapely, fair, and plump, and fleshy, rounded limbs. Her exquisite head, set upon a thick, bull-like neck of snowy whiteness, moved with a most seductive grace. Her dark, lustrous hair was thick, luxuriant, and naturally wavy. Her mouth was always smiling. Her cheeks were full and rosy, and her eyes brimmed with an irresistible allure. Her ears were small, translucent, and finely sculpted, invitingly shaped for the whispering of sweet words of love. Whenever Domenico was away, an elderly female relative stayed at the house with Felicita. It was Felicita herself who had insisted upon this arrangement, in order to ward off any suspicion on the

part of her husband who, while fully appreciating her virtues and knowing her to be a woman of honor, was nonetheless naturally prone to jealousy. Many of the handsomest young men in Subiaco had attempted to make advances toward Felicita; yet, as a good and virtuous wife, she had spurnfully rebuffed them all. "She is truly the pearl of wives," everyone would say—men and women alike—and not without a hint of jealousy. Moreover, Felicita was pious and devout: she was a regular churchgoer, attended Mass every day, went to confession and received Communion every week, and had even entrusted her spiritual guidance to the parish priest himself.

When a woman is young and beautiful, she is easily made the object of suspicion. The town gossips, who could not bear Felicita's physical and moral superiority, began to take note of her assiduous attendance at church, commenting upon it and casting malicious aspersions. They took to spying on her movements and her home, and eventually discovered that the curate visited her and spent long periods in her company.

"Her female relative is in the house," those who sought to defend her would object.

"She acts as their go-between," the malicious tongues would retort.

And so, in short order, spreading from mouth to mouth, the news circulated that Felicita was the curate's mistress. Domenico, as is always the case, was the last to learn of the rumors circulating through the village regarding his wife. When the truth finally reached him, he felt a shattering blow to his heart; he realized that everything was over for him: no more happiness, no peace, no future; for to him, happiness, peace, and the future were all embodied in that one adored, yet unfaithful, woman. He plotted his revenge. But before carrying it out, he resolved to verify the facts down to the last detail. Punishment had to descend inexorably upon all the guilty parties. Was his own life shattered? Then he would shatter the lives of all those who had betrayed him.

With a power of dissimulation of which only the bitterest hatred could have rendered him capable, he locked his secret deep within the innermost recesses of his wounded soul. Not a single glance, not a gesture, not a word betrayed his inner turmoil—neither to his wife nor to anyone else—revealing the terrible realization of his moral ruin, brought about by that betrayal. He waited. He waited until he had gathered every last detail of his misfortune. One day, he set out as usual in the small cart he used to transport his wares, announcing that he was heading to a fair scheduled to last eight days. But that very night, unbeknownst to anyone, he returned to Subiaco on foot; he slipped into his house and hid himself in a room adjacent to the bedroom.

He saw the curate arrive and enter; he saw all the preparations for a revel arranged by his wife and her female kinswoman, yet he did not move. He heard the clinking of glasses, the merry cheers, and the lewd jests spilling from the lips of the half-drunken curate, yet still, he did not move. He witnessed the clearing away of the dinner remnants and the preparation of the "love nest," yet he did not move. Only when he had absolute certainty that the curate lay in his wife's arms did he emerge from his hiding place; armed with a long dagger, he made his way through the darkness toward the bridal chamber. At that very moment, the female relative returned carrying a lamp; terror struck her speechless. She could not utter a scream, but instead threw herself across the doorway to block the outraged husband's path. Domenico Treca spoke not a word: he plunged the dagger into her heart, burying it up to the hilt and withdrew it, still steaming with blood; then, with the bound of a panther, he sprang upon the priest, who had risen from the bed at the sound of the relative's fall and, with a single blow, extinguished his life.

"'Menico! Mercy! Have mercy!" screamed Felicita, sitting up half-naked in the defiled marital bed, extending her beautiful arms toward him as if to invite him to an embrace.

Treca stood for a moment, gazing at her. Perhaps the wanton woman, surcharged with a magnetic aura, cast an erotic spell upon his senses, flashing before his mind the horrific thought of once again savoring the love of that female, now steeped in the very blood he had shed for her sake. Yet he instantly cast the thought aside, for alongside his passion, a jealous fury immediately reawakened within him.

"No! No!" he exclaimed, his voice choked by a death rattle tightening in his throat. "No!"

And, hurling himself upon Felicita, he drove the dagger into her chest—grazing, as he did so, the arm with which the wretched woman had attempted to shield herself. But, fierce as the blow was, it did not kill her instantly; and, with that illusory surge of strength born of desperation, she attempted to fight back against her killer. But the contact with that flesh, which he had once longed to cover with kisses, only further inflamed the rage of the betrayed man. Treca was no longer a man; he was a frenzied beast.

He continued to savage that beautiful body, covering it with wounds. The blood, spurting violently, stained his face and wet his lips. Treca savored its taste and grew intoxicated by it. His murderous frenzy lasted until he finally collapsed to the ground, utterly spent and unconscious. When he came to, after a long interval, it felt as though he were waking from a dream; he rose, looked around, and the full, terrible truth unfolded before his eyes. A wave of revulsion washed over him; he tried to

flee but stumbled over the curate's corpse and fell. He scrambled back to his feet, took a few hasty steps, and stumbled once more, this time over the body of his kinswoman. He rose a third time and, staggering, made his way out onto the street, still clutching the dagger tightly in his right hand.

Dawn was breaking, and the pallid light—falling upon a face twisted by spasmodic muscular convulsions—rendered him cadaverous. He looked like a man struck down by a violent death, rising from the grave. The blood dripping from his clothes, which were caked with thick clots, completed this ghastly tableau. The first women to spot him in this state fled screaming in terror, crossing themselves as they ran; the men who caught sight of him lacked the courage to approach, and instead went in search of the constables. The officers arrived at a run and, as they handcuffed him and bound him securely, asked:

"What have you done?"

That cold question seemed to restore his sense of self.

"I have taken my revenge," he replied—and spoke not another word.

Upon being taken to prison, he slept for several hours: a fitful, troubled sleep. It was only upon waking, after this period of rest, that he was granted the relief of tears, a release that saved his wavering sanity. He burst into uncontrollable weeping and pleaded insistently to be executed immediately.

"Life weighs too heavily upon me!" he murmured.

Yet he was obliged to wait until the legal formalities of the trial had run their course. These did not take long, however, as he had already confessed; and so, on July 4, 1801, I hanged him in Subiaco. An immense crowd had gathered there from all quarters, for the uproar raised by his heinous crime had aroused universal curiosity. Several days prior to his execution, Domenico Treca had lapsed into a state of complete apathy. He made his confession and received the consolations of religion; and as he ascended the gallows, he was no longer a man—he was an automaton.

Chapter VII

The first executions of the year 1802 involved highwaymen. The first of these—Domenico De Cesare—I hanged in the Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo on the 8th of February. And if ever there was a man who deserved to go to the devil with a noose around his neck, it was he. He had robbed a poor street sweeper to strip him of the few baiocchi with which he was meant to buy bread for his children. Upon his arrest, he confessed to the crime with cynicism, showing not the slightest remorse. He spurned the first spiritual comforter who approached him, spitting in his face; and as I bound his arms, he said to me:

"Watch yourself, Mastro Titta, for if you do not hold me fast, I shall escape and come pay you a visit by night in Borgo Sant'Angelo."

Likewise at Ponte—twelve days later, on February 20, 1802—I hanged and quartered Ascenzo Rocchi and Giovanni Battista Limiti, who had assaulted several carters on the road to Bracciano, robbing them of their money, their cloaks, and even two small casks of wine they were carrying for their own consumption. One of the carters had attempted to defend himself, whereupon they struck him on the head with a cudgel, knocking him senseless to the ground. Surprised by the constables, they fled, but were apprehended shortly thereafter, tried, convicted, and executed. They died fortified by the rites of religion and sincerely repentant, displaying courage even in the face of the gallows.

A far more arduous task fell to me on March 15, 1802—a day on which I was required to bludgeon, slit the throat of, and quarter Giovanni Francesco Pace di Venanzio—once again at Ponte Sant'Angelo—for having robbed and murdered a Jew. The affair had unfolded thus: Pace, a native of Naples, had set up a tailor's shop at San Carlo 'a Catinari and obtained his supplies on credit from a Jewish merchant named Abramo, who lived in the Ghetto. Unable to extract payment from him, the merchant one day compelled him to sign a series of long-term promissory notes. One evening, while making his way home, Pace encountered Abramo at the Quattro Capi Bridge; a dark thought suddenly seized him. He looked around and saw not a living soul; it was cold, a thick sleet was falling, and no one had ventured out of their homes. The tailor's intention was to force the return of the promissory notes. No sooner had the idea taken shape than he resolved to put it into action; suddenly seizing the merchant by the throat, he demanded:

"Hand over the papers!"

"I don’t have them!" the Jew replied, terrified, his voice strangled in his throat.

"Hand over the papers!" Pace repeated.

Yet the other, even beneath that powerful grip, clasped his hands tightly against his chest to prevent his attacker from frisking him. Pace then drew from his pocket the shears he always carried with him and plunged them repeatedly into the Jew’s throat. Abramo collapsed, drenched in the blood gushing from his wounds, and died with his arms still rigidly clasped across his chest. Pace then bent over him and removed from his greatcoat a wallet filled with financial instruments and a purse containing a few coins. He then calmly went home to sleep. At that time, violent assaults, even within the city, were a daily occurrence; or more precisely, a nightly one, and rarely caused much of a stir. Moreover, given that the victim was an Israelite, the matter seemed almost natural. The authorities conducted a brief investigation, but—having failed to uncover any evidence—the matter was soon forgotten.

Emboldened by his impunity, Pace (having already spent the coins) decided to make use of the valuables; he went to offer them to a money changer on the Corso. Suspicious, the money changer alerted the public prosecutor, who ordered a search of the tailor’s shop; there, he discovered the wallet containing documents that identified its rightful owner. Pace was placed under arrest and committed to prison. At first, he denied everything with brazen impudence, claiming he had found the wallet lying on the ground in Via Rua. But when cornered, he finally confessed and received—as I have said—a reward befitting his heinous crime.

On April 3, 1802, having traveled to Fermo, I executed Domenico Zeri by bludgeoning and quartering for having murdered his own father following a quarrel over the division of a small plot of land they had inherited upon the death of a distant relative. They were both dining in the kitchen, and as their conversation grew heated, they consumed a great quantity of *vino cotto:* a potent, reduced wine that goes straight to the head and reduces a man to a brutish beast. From one bitter word to the next, the father threatened to disinherit Domenico Zeri entirely, to deprive him even of the meager portion he was otherwise bound to leave him upon his death.

"You will not do that!" Domenico Zeri suddenly exclaimed, rising to his feet in a menacing stance, his eyes bloodshot and bulging.

"And why not?" the father retorted, rising as well, almost as if issuing a challenge.

"Because I won't give you the time," he replied, stepping back a few paces from the table toward the wide hearth, and reaching a hand behind him as if groping for something.

The old man, growing ever more enraged, snatched up the now-empty earthenware jug sitting on the table and hurled it at his son, striking him on the forehead. Feeling his face streaming with blood, he lost all sense of reason; seizing the fire shovel, he dealt a terrible blow to his father's head, sending him gasping to the ground. At this gruesome sight, Domenico Zeri fled; he wandered the countryside for several days before finally being arrested by constables in Recanati.

Brought back to Fermo, more dead than alive from terror and the torment of remorse, he immediately confessed his heinous crime and made no attempt to defend himself. The days between his sentencing and his execution were for him a ceaseless agony, slow and cruel. He lay delirious day and night, gripped by a raging fever that defied even the most potent antipyretics. It became necessary to hasten the execution of the sentence, lest he pass on to the next world and thus cheat human justice. In his final moments, comforted by the Capuchin friars, he seemed to rally somewhat; he walked toward the gallows reciting prayers and commending himself to the mercy of the faithful. Yet his was a life (so to speak) of mere semblance; when I blindfolded him, his flesh was already cold, and I would swear he felt nothing of the mallet's blow. After being quartered, his remains remained exposed on the scaffold throughout the day, hanging from hooks embedded in the timber frame. During the night, they were taken down and laid to rest by the Capuchins themselves in a small plot of ground adjacent to the cemetery, as he could not, by law, be interred within the cemetery proper.

Chapter VIII

I candidly confess that, of all my executions, those that went most against my grain were the executions of women. And this was not due to any overt spirit of morbid pity, nor because I allowed myself to be swayed in any way by feminine charms. Rather, it was because I have always regarded woman as a being intellectually and physically inferior to man, and I found it repugnant to have to exercise my office upon such inferiority. Yet I must acknowledge that woman—who is, after all, such a gentle and graceful creature—sometimes exceeds man himself in ferocity, particularly when consumed by passion.

At the very beginning of May in the year 1802, I was summoned to Orvieto for the hanging of Agostina Paglialonga, who had been condemned to the supreme penalty for having barbarously butchered her three children. Agostina had been left a widow with three little ones: one barely weaned from the breast, the second two and a half years old, and the third, the eldest, eleven months older than the second. Beautiful and striking in her figure, with a pleasing countenance and a comfortable income, she soon attracted many suitors: some out of a mere desire for carnal pleasure, others driven by the honorable intention of helping her cast off her widow's weeds and leading her back to the altar. Among these suitors was a young butcher, a veritable Hercules, robust and promising excellent physical satisfaction for a woman inclined toward sexual intimacy. Naturally, he was the one Agostina favored; yet, once he had achieved his aim of possessing her, he began to drag his feet regarding the matter of marriage. Finally cornered by Paglialonga—with his back against the wall, as it were—he offered the excuse that he did not feel he could marry a woman who had three children that were not his own.

"Is that the only obstacle?" Agostina asked him one evening.

"That, and that alone."

"Without the children…"

"I would marry you tomorrow."

The woman did not press with further questions. After spending three hours in frenzied embraces, the butcher departed, leaving behind on the table an axe, one of those used for splitting bones, which he had brought to have sharpened. Left alone, Paglialonga picked up the axe; a terrible thought flashed through her mind and, in short order, overwhelmed her so completely that it took her captive. She gripped the axe and, entering the room where her children lay sleeping, lifted them one by

one from their little beds and murdered them, cleaving their chests and skulls with the fatal weapon and casting their lifeless bodies one atop the other like so many slaughtered lambs. Then she hacked them into pieces, carried them into the kitchen, and set them to boil in the large cauldron she usually used to prepare lye for her laundry. Using that very water, she scrubbed the bloodstains from the floor and cleaned the axe until it was spotless and gleaming like new.

Having perpetrated this horrific crime, she fished the cooked flesh from the cauldron and went out to scatter it across the fields, leaving it to serve as fodder for the dogs and other stray beasts. When morning broke, she returned the axe to the butcher, informing him that a brother of her late husband had come to fetch her children and had taken them away with him to a distant village in the southern provinces. She repeated this same story to everyone who inquired about the whereabouts of her little ones. Yet God would not suffer that wicked hand to go unpunished: a large dog, entering Orvieto with a bone in its jaws, caught the attention of a physician, who recognized the bone as the tibia of a child. An investigation was launched, and other remains were subsequently discovered. Public rumor began to accuse Paglialonga of the slaughter of her children, and she was arrested. Upon her arrest, she cynically confessed to the crime. She was sentenced, and on the morning of May 5, 1802, it fell to me to hang her. News of the crime had drawn a massive crowd from the surrounding villages to Orvieto.

As we rode out of the prison gates in the cart, heading toward the square where the execution was to take place, I feared for a moment that, despite the escort, the spectators might snatch the criminal from my grasp, such was the fury that gripped the crowd, and the women in particular. Nevertheless, Agostina Paglialonga did not blanch; accompanied by her confessor, she ascended the scaffold with a steady step and met her death courageously.

It fell to me to hang another woman, one of striking beauty in both face and figure, in Todi on July 6, 1808: Rosa Ruggeri. She was executed alongside her brothers, Angelo and Paolo Caratelli, and Antonio Scarinei, the very men she had hired to murder her own husband. Antonio Scarinei was her lover, and Rosa was madly infatuated with him; she wanted him for herself—wholly and exclusively—unable to bear the thought of him leaving her side for even a moment. He proposed that they run away together; but the woman, after weighing the matter at length and calculating every possible consequence, refused.

"So, you do not love me?" Scarinei asked her.

"Rid me of my husband, and let us be married."

"You mean it?"

"Without a doubt."

They devised a plan to stage a home invasion. Rosa hid her lover and his accomplices inside her house, and once she saw that her husband was fast asleep, she summoned them. Scarinei emerged from beneath the bed where he had been hiding and dealt the unfortunate man the first blow, sending him crashing to the floor; rushing in at his cries, the accomplices, knives in hand, finished him off, while the two lovers—horrifying as it is to recount—threw themselves into one another's arms upon that very marriage bed.

The two Caratelli brothers then proceeded to plunder everything of value they could find before making their escape, leaving Rosa and Scarinei behind, consumed by their amorous delirium. But, caught by the constables with the loot and interrogated separately on the spot, they became flustered, contradicted themselves, and aroused the suspicions of the official before whom they had been brought. Cornered, and lured by the mirage of impunity, they confessed to the crime in the minutest detail; as a result, Rosa Ruggeri and Antonio Scarinei were caught in bed, at the foot of which still lay the corpse of the murdered husband.

They were all sentenced to be hanged, a sentence I was required to carry out in the following order: first Angiolo, then Paolo Caratelli, third Antonio Scarinei, and finally Rosa Ruggeri—so that the spectacle of their accomplices' deaths might gradually heighten the agony of the punishment. The men met their deaths with considerable courage, attended by the spiritual comforters to whom they had made their Christian confessions. The woman, however, fell into a terrible frenzy; even with the noose already around her neck, she screamed like a soul damned. Yet it did not last long: in the blink of an eye, I dispatched her to join her companions.

Chapter IX

On May 8, 1802, I carried out my forty-third execution: dispatching, by bludgeon and noose in the customary manner, a certain Antonio Nucci in Perugia. He had been condemned to this punishment for having murdered and robbed a Capuchin friar, the Prior of the convent in that city. Nucci was a young *caposcarico*—a foreman of porters—well known for his joviality and for the burlesque antics he would engage in whenever the opportunity arose.

The Capuchin had a reputation for lechery and for being addicted to unnatural pleasures. Upon seeing Nucci, and admiring his handsome, well-rounded physique, he succumbed to the temptation to derive carnal gratification from him. He began to pursue the young man under the pretext of guiding him toward a better life and setting him upon the path of virtue. Nucci, however, treated the matter as a joke and feigned compliance with the friar, who eventually succeeded in persuading him to visit the convent to make his confession and atone for his sins. Yet, when the young man approached the confessional, the Prior allegedly made obscene propositions to him and arranged a rendezvous for that evening outside the city, at a small tavern on the shores of Lake Trasimeno, a place where the local fishermen were accustomed to gathering.

Nucci did not fail to keep the appointment; they dined merrily, indulging in copious libations, for the tavern was deserted at that hour, the usual patrons having not yet arrived. At dusk, they left the tavern and ascended the nearby hill via a winding side path. Such was the consistent testimony given in court by several witnesses who had seen them together—the innkeeper foremost among them. From that moment onward, however, we can rely solely upon the assertions of Nucci himself, a man who had all too many compelling reasons to recount the events in a manner that suited his own ends. Let us hear him:

"What did you do," the judge asked him, "when you left the main road to take the narrow mountain path?"

"We ventured into the thicket; the Prior was quite drunk and kept returning to the propositions he had made to me in the confessional."

"Had you agreed to those propositions?"

"Yes, but only in jest. I wanted to make a fool of the filthy friar."

"How did you respond, at that moment, to the Prior’s renewed insistence?"

"I replied by objecting that the setting was unsuitable and that we might be caught."

"And the Capuchin?"

"He walked on until we reached a small clearing, ringed by leafy trees, and there he said to me: 'Let’s rest here for a while.'"

"And you?"

"I agreed."

"So, you were well-disposed?"

"Quite the opposite."

"Did you at least pretend to be?"

"I said nothing. He told me lewd little stories—tales he claimed had taken place within the convent; I listened and laughed."

"In what position were you?"

"Lying on the grass, on a gentle slope bordering the clearing, right where the trees grew thickest."

"Continue."

"Feeling the sudden urge to relieve myself, I asked the Prior for leave, to which he replied: ‘Go right ahead; take your time.’ But as I was preparing to do so, I felt myself seized from behind by the arms by the friar, who, with a thrust of his knee, knocked me flat onto my back."

"Why did you not break free immediately, if you were not a consenting party?"

"I tried, but his arms were stronger than mine."

"You should have called for help."

"I would have wasted my breath; at that hour, one never finds a soul in the thicket."

"In short: how did it end?"

"I drew the knife I kept in my trouser pocket."

"To kill the Capuchin?"

"No: only to frighten him."

"And to simply frighten him, you killed him?"

"Seeing that the Prior was truly intent on forcing himself upon me, I struck him a blow so that he would let me go."

"A small blow that pierced his heart."

"That is not my fault."

"Were you still lying on your back?"

"Yes."

The medical report contradicts your assertion, for the wound runs from top to bottom. The tale you spin is nothing but an obscene fabrication with which you vainly hope to deceive the law. You lured the unfortunate Prior—God knows under what pretext—down that deserted path, deep into the woods; and once you deemed yourself safe, seizing the moment when he had bent down, you dealt him the knife-thrust that struck him dead.

"*That* is the fabrication—not mine."

"The gold snuffbox that belonged to the Capuchin—which was found in your possession at the time of your arrest—proves beyond all doubt that you murdered him for the sake of plunder."

"I saw it glinting on the ground, and I picked it up; Perhaps it slipped out from the front opening of his cassock during the scuffle."

"And the money you took from him?"

"I took no money from him whatsoever."

"The witnesses are unanimous in declaring that the Prior always went out carrying a well-filled leather purse to cover the community's expenses. And in the days immediately following the crime, you were seen squandering it, wasting money on revelry far more than usual, and certainly more than your own finances could support."

Antonio Nucci attempted to defend himself, but the testimony against him was crushing. The Prior's disappearance was noted at the convent almost immediately, yet his body was not discovered in the brushwood by a group of woodcutters until eight days later. Public rumor swiftly pointed the finger at Nucci, with whom the friar had last been seen. Nucci was arrested and put on trial. However, the snuffbox was the only item ever recovered. Perhaps he had buried the money, intending to retrieve it piecemeal whenever he had need of it. Upon his conviction, he accepted the rites of religion and faced his execution without a trace of cowardice.

During the execution, however, a curious incident occurred. Two apprentices—brought from the prison to assist me in constructing the scaffold—fell into an argument behind the structure itself and came to blows. They had to be separated by the constables.

This incident calls to mind a similar occurrence that took place in Palermo some time later, an event whose notoriety spread throughout the entire world. While, atop the scaffold, the executioner was guillotining a husband who had murdered his wife out of jealousy, two rivals (both lovers of the slain

woman) who had managed, by separate routes, to gain access to the space beneath the scaffold in order to get a better view of the execution, were suddenly seized by a fit of rage; drawing knives, they lunged at one another, engaging in a terrible duel from which one emerged dead, while the other, gravely wounded, survived him by only a short time.

Chapter X

On July 7, 1802, I inaugurated the second half of my first century[xii] by hanging Felice Rovina at Collevecchio; he had been condemned to the gallows for having strangled a hermit named Fra Pasquale—though he was neither a friar in the slightest, nor named Pasquale. His story deserves to be recounted here.

Fra Pasquale belonged to the minor provincial nobility; he possessed a fertile intellect and a handsome physique, but also insatiable appetites and courage of the most unshakeable kind. Had his family been wealthier—and able to supply him with the funds his dissolute lifestyle demanded—perhaps he would have met with a happier fate. Instead, driven by his passions into the clutches of destitution, he strayed from the righteous path and plunged headlong down the slippery slope of vice, which leads inevitably to crime. And had he not been sustained by his exceptionally keen intellect and cunning of the highest order, he would surely have ended up in my hands himself, rather than his murderer. After a long string of rogueries and acts of violence, Fra Pasquale—having killed a rival in love who hailed from a prominent noble house—was forced to take to the hills and embrace the life of a bandit. Such outlaws were legion in those days, and it often happened that they would turn upon one another, much to the delight of the government, which could scarcely believe its good fortune that these brigands were killing one another off, thereby sparing the state the expense and trouble of doing the job itself.

Fra Pasquale roamed the countryside for many years, eluding every plot hatched to capture him. Even the constables themselves would lend him a hand: partly out of fear, partly out of sympathy, and partly out of sheer greed for gain; for it was his custom to share a portion of his spoils with them as well. He had thus reached that age when even the most robust men begin to feel the need for rest and was turning over in his mind how he might secure it, when he learned that an enormous bounty had been placed on the head of another bandit, against whom every major effort and every subtle stratagem had been deployed in an attempt to capture him. The bounty—enormous for those times, I repeat—amounted to three thousand scudi. Yet no one had taken the bait; the dangers to be faced in order to claim it were simply too great.

Fra Pasquale (let us continue to call him by that name, even though he had not yet formally adopted it) was struck by a brilliant idea and immediately set about putting it into action. One evening,

just as Monsignor Fiscale had finished his supper and was settling in for his customary after-dinner nap —with a flask of wine at his side and the table still laden with food—he was informed of the arrival of a stranger who requested an audience with him.

The Monsignor, who was in high spirits (and who, moreover, knew himself to be well-guarded) gave orders that the man be admitted. There entered a man of about fifty, with hair falling over his shoulders and a long beard—both hair and beard heavily streaked with gray—dressed in the style of a hunter, yet with a certain elegance.

"Who are you?" the Fiscale demanded, affecting the brusque demeanor of a man who felt both disturbed and annoyed.

"My name would be of no use to you at the moment, even were I to reveal it."

"What is it you want?"

"I seek certain clarifications from Your Most Reverend Lordship."

"On what subject?"

"Regarding the bounty offered for the capture of the bandit Lucarini."

"Do you feel yourself capable of earning it?"

"Why not?"

"Are you aware that three months have now passed since the bounty was announced, and yet no one has been tempted to pursue it?"

"I am."

"And you would like to make the attempt?"

"I would like to succeed."

Monsignor Fiscale removed his spectacles and wiped the lenses with a corner of his napkin; then he put them away and gazed fixedly at the newcomer. The latter met his gaze and did not move. Fiscale's judgment appeared favorable, for his furrowed brow smoothed out, and he exclaimed:

"Very well: you strike me as a man of deeds, rather than of words."

"Unfortunately!"

"Unfortunately?" Fiscale repeated, knitting his brows. "Why?"

"Because deeds often land men in nasty predicaments."

"I understand. You have some score to settle with the law."

"That may be."

"I warn you: I have no patience for ambiguous turns of phrase." Monsignor uttered these words in a severe—almost harsh—tone, glancing around as if searching for someone or something. Fra Pasquale gave no sign of having taken offense and continued:

"Should someone bring you Lucarini's head…"

"He would receive the promised bounty: a stack of freshly minted coins, gleaming one atop the other."

"And what if he had accounts to settle with the law, as Monsignor mentioned just moments ago?"

"He would not be called to account at that particular moment."

"And what if he sought a guarantee of immunity?"

"That would require prior examination."

"What if it were a case of a strayed soul, eager to return to the righteous path and atone for his errors by rendering service to the government?"

"He might obtain it through tacit consent."

"Meaning?"

"By changing his name and ensuring his conduct gave no further cause for public disturbance, his true identity would remain unknown, and his past would be forgotten. However, I assume you did not come to me merely to subject me to an interrogation. I am not in the habit of allowing the roles to be reversed. What is your name?"

"Francesco Perilli."

"Of the Counts of Casana?"

"Precisely."

"One head is much like another. I guarantee that yours shall remain firmly upon your shoulders —provided you bring me Lucarini's... How soon?"

"In eight days."

"So be it. But heed this warning: should you attempt to deceive me, you would leave this room only to be taken to the dungeons, and leave the dungeons only to go to the gallows."

"To the headsman's block! Monsignor—to the block!"

"True; you are of noble lineage, I had quite forgotten. But that is merely a matter of form; it alters nothing of the substance. You came here of your own free will, and you are free to depart the same way. Rest assured, however: if you do not return, I shall know how to catch you."

Perilli bowed and took his leave. Eight days later, at the very same hour, the same figure appeared once again at the Palace of the Fiscal, and was immediately received by Monsignor. Perilli was still dressed as a hunter, and carried a basket tucked under his arm.

"Have you brought me the game?" the Fiscal asked pleasantly, pushing his chair back slightly from the table which remained fully set, with the remnants of dessert still upon it.

"Yes, Monsignor. And specifically the head... of game that you requested."

"Let us see, let us see."

With lightning speed, the hunter snatched a large, chased silver platter from the table; he then drew Lucarini's head from the basket and, placing it upon the platter, presented it to the Fiscal—just as the head of the Baptist was presented to Herodias. Monsignor strove to appear composed, yet a faint pallor spread across his face, betraying the visceral revulsion that such a sight stirred within him at that moment.

"Put it away," he murmured finally, averting his gaze.

And Perilli, seizing the head by its hair, placed it back into the basket; he then covered it with a napkin taken from the table—the very napkin he had used to wipe his hand, which was stained with clotted blood.

"Monsignor," he said calmly, "I have kept my end of the bargain; may I count on yours?"

"You have my word. My majordomo will pay you the three thousand scudi. What do you intend to do?"

"I shall don the habit of my patron, Saint Francis—if Monsignor grants me leave to do so."

"Do you wish to enter a cloister?"

"No; I do not feel worthy."

The Fiscal detected the underlying irony in those words, and smiled. Perilli continued:

"I shall retire to the countryside, to a small hermitage—which once served me as a sanctuary—nestled in a charming, silent little valley, much like the one where stood the House of Sleep, sung of by Messer Ludovico."

"Will you keep me apprised of your whereabouts?"

"I shall not fail to do so, Monsignor."

"You shall receive a fitting reward for it."

"Thank you."

With a deep bow, the bandit took his leave of the Fiscal and proceeded to the Master of the Household to collect his bounty.

Chapter XI

A few years had passed. Perilli had scrupulously adhered to his program regarding his metamorphosis. Having transformed himself into a Franciscan friar, he had settled in a hut situated at the bottom of a small valley, nestled against the slope of a hill, a property he had purchased, along with a few *rubbie* of surrounding land, from a shepherd. Its exterior appearance was utterly humble; the interior, however—divided into two compartments—was curious indeed. The first served as a sort of laboratory, featuring a small furnace from which smoke escaped through a chimney rising from the roof; atop the furnace stood retorts, alembics, vials, and flasks of every description. In the second compartment stood a small, crudely fashioned wooden table, upon which rested an earthenware jug for water; nearby was a three-legged stool, supporting a human skull and a bronze lamp with three wicks. A mat woven from bark lay spread upon the floor, serving as a bed, while a crucifix hanging on the wall marked the head of the sleeping area. At the far end, a small door concealed a sort of cabinet carved directly into the wall, a space cluttered with bundles containing the medicinal herbs the hermit was wont to gather and distribute to the peasants who came seeking them.

Yet that cabinet concealed a hidden door—one that pivoted on its hinges, swinging outward together with the horizontal shelves upon which the bundles of herbs rested—and provided access to a third, secret compartment. Far more spacious than the previous two combined, this chamber extended deep into the hillside, ultimately leading to a natural grotto, an opening concealed behind a door clad in a tall Venetian mirror, set within a broad, intricately carved and gilded frame. The cave served as a storehouse for the hermit's riches; a long corridor, hewn into the calcareous tuff, led to a second exit, guarded by an iron-barred door that opened only from within and was, on the outside, concealed by large boulders clad in green moss. This exit opened into the dense thicket that blanketed the entire slope of the rugged hill. The secret chamber within the hermitage was lavishly furnished and equipped with every comfort of life: a spacious four-poster bed, draped in velvet and lace curtains that enclosed it like a sanctuary; vast wardrobes of painted and inlaid wood, adorned with friezes and gilding; and a round table featuring a gilded bronze pedestal and a mosaic tabletop. Chairs and divans, upholstered in velvet and gold-embossed Cordovan leather, comprised the furnishings—at once sumptuous and elegant—and made it clear that Fra Pasquale must have spent his early years amidst luxury, thereby

refining his taste. This chamber was his own little paradise: a paradise that, unlike Muhammad's, boasted no Houris, yet which nonetheless received, from time to time, the smile of a woman.

The hermit's fame had spread far and wide; clients seeking herbal simples and medicinal compounds flocked to him not only from the surrounding villages but from distant lands as well. Fra Pasquale sold not only the medicines he concocted in his alembics, but also salutary herbs gathered from the woods and the brushwood lining the foaming stream that watered the small valley where he had established his dwelling. He also compounded potent philters possessing the power to make people fall in love—or out of it—to render men either more vigorous or incapable of procreation, and (worst of all) to spare women (and young maidens in particular) the burden of motherhood by dissolving embryos and fetuses and expelling them prematurely from the womb, ensuring they never reached full term. Some even whispered that more than one widow owed her early—and eagerly awaited—widow's weeds to his potions. Yet perhaps these were merely malicious rumors, and nothing more.

It is certainly true, however, that he bore the reputation of a sorcerer; more than one old woman, catching sight from afar of the roof of his hut, or the thin plume of smoke rising from it, would hastily make the sign of the Holy Cross. Priests, upon encountering him, would mutter: *ite ad diabolum, ite ad inferos:* "Go to the Devil! Go to Hell!" The rural constables, conversely, did not disdain to linger on the threshold of his laboratory, asking him for a jug of cool water—or perhaps even accepting a jug of wine—while simultaneously gleaning information from him regarding the various folk roaming the countryside. Information he was ever-eager to provide, all the while striving to ferret out details of his own regarding the specific missions with which they had been entrusted.

Dialogues such as this would take place between them:

"Brother Pasquale, have you seen any suspicious persons roaming about these parts?"

"I don't believe so. However, a poor sick man who came to me for aid told me he had encountered a band of men—pistols concealed beneath their cloaks—who stopped him, questioned him, and then let him go without molesting him."

"From which direction did they come?"

"From Collevecchio."

"And where were they headed?"

"They veered to the left, skirting the thicket."

"Was it at night?"

"In the morning, toward dawn. And they must have made a good haul, for they were in high spirits and carried bulging saddlebags. They stopped my sick man more out of curiosity than anything else. In fact, I believe they even gave him a few *baiocchi* as a gift."

"That must be them."

"Are you on the trail of some gang of highwaymen?"

"A private carriage carrying travelers of means was attacked. It is likely the band of the infamous Caciotaro."

"I wouldn't want to be in his shoes."

"Why?"

"Because it won't be long before he falls into your hands."

"Let's hope so."

"Are you alone?"

"We have arranged a stakeout together with the bargello of Collevecchio and his guards—right there in the thicket that your band skirted. It's a safe bet that it is Caciotaro's gang."

"Good luck!"

The constables took their leave, pleased and gratified by the news they had received from Brother Pasquale. And Brother Pasquale—who had business dealings with Caciotaro—closed up his hut and, passing through the grotto, made his way into the thicket, where he quickly found a messenger to dispatch to him, so as to warn him and ensure he would not fall into the ambush laid by the bargello. To *Il Caciotaro*—the Cheese-maker—and other bandit chieftains of high standing, Fra Pasquale would also furnish information regarding wayfarers, couriers, and travelers of great consequence who were passing through—or were expected to pass through—those places where it was easiest to waylay and rob them. And for this service, he claimed a fifth of the spoils.

On the other hand, however, if some wretch—whether driven by necessity or by having committed a crime for which he was sought by the law—ventured into the wilderness as a novice outlaw, Fra Pasquale was quick to catch wind of it. He would extend his inquiries as far as possible and relay the intelligence to the Public Prosecutor in Rome, who, in return, maintained his protection over the hermit and never failed to reward him handsomely. Thus, the cunning hermit played a double game, reaping vast profits while simultaneously ensuring his own impunity.

His regular clientele consisted largely of newlyweds and young women in love; upon the latter—especially if they were comely—he was wont to exact a carnal tribute. The hoarfrost that age had

deposited upon his head had neither extinguished his lust nor sated his thirst for carnal pleasures. With the utmost cunning, he would lure them into his snares; and once they were entrapped, they did not escape his clutches easily. Some yielded reluctantly, fearing that worse might befall them; others suffered his violence but remained silent: partly out of shame, partly out of fear. And finally, there were those who submitted with pleasure; these were admitted into his inner sanctum—the third compartment—where they would spend nights in unbridled orgies, intoxicated by potent wines and by the hermit's frenzied embraces. And at times they even served as his intermediaries, sending him unwary young girls in need of his manifold services: girls who, before having their requests granted, were forced to endure the indignity of his caresses and kisses.

Chapter XII

One fine May morning, Fra Pasquale, while standing in his workshop, saw descending the slope that led into the small valley a shapely maiden of fifteen, precociously developed for her age. Her full, swelling bosom rose high beneath her white bodice; her lithe, slender waist—cinched by the stays worn over it—served only to accentuate her powerful hips, which swayed with every step she took; and her short skirt revealed the outline of a shapely, sinewy leg. Fra Pasquale was struck by the sight; his eyes seemed to burn with fire; his blood hammered against his temples; and his lips quivered with voluptuous desire.

"Where is that little hen headed?" he asked himself as he watched her. "Could she be coming to see me?"

And so, as not to make her feel self-conscious, he remained motionless and ceased staring at her so intently, as he had been doing moments before. The maiden continued her slow descent along the winding path; yet every few steps she would pause: now casting her eyes upward toward the heights from which she had come, now gazing down into the little valley toward her destination. Her hesitation made it plain that she still had certain scruples to overcome. Perhaps her guardian angel, hovering at her right, was whispering in her ear: "Turn back." At such moments, she would stand frozen on the slope for an instant, her foot suspended in mid-air. But the Devil, lurking at her left, was ever ready to offer encouragement, urging her: "What are you afraid of, you fool? Do you or do you not want to be certain that Felicino loves you—and that he will marry you? Go on!" And with that, the maiden would take several hurried steps further down the slope.

But at a certain point, it seemed as though her good angel had once again gained the upper hand. She had now reached three-quarters of the way down the slope: she could clearly see the interior of the hut and Friar Pasquale, who—while feigning absorption in his laboratory tasks—did not fail to keep a watchful eye on her. Suddenly, she turned about and began scrambling back up the narrow path with great haste. Evidently, she did not wish to give her evil counselor time to goad her toward that sinful destination.

Unfortunately, she misstepped, stumbling over a sharp, jutting rock that struck and wounded her collarbone; she tumbled headlong down the path for a good distance, until her garments snagged in the brambles and brought her to a halt. Friar Pasquale rushed immediately to her aid. When he reached her

side, he realized she had fainted; he paused to gaze in admiration at her magnificent form—her flesh rosy and velvety—now left exposed as her tunic had ridden up, caught fast by the very thorns that held her suspended. Seized by erotic frenzy, the lecherous hermit was on the verge of brutally taking advantage of the innocent creature, right there in the position in which she lay. But a glimmer of reason stayed his hand.

He gently disentangled the girl's clothes from the brambles; then, lifting her into his arms, he carried her into the hut and laid her upon the magnificent four-poster bed within the secret chamber. The young girl lay in a deep swoon, brought on by the shock of the fall and the acute pain of her wound, which had begun to bleed. Friar Pasquale first removed her boots and stockings; he then washed her wounds with spring water and applied fresh arnica which he went to gather just a few paces from the hut, where he cultivated it in a small transplanted patch. Then he removed the white kerchief that covered her head; her luxuriant hair, thus freed from its bonds, cascaded down her shoulders, framing her beautiful oval face—pale, yet still blooming with the freshness of youth. The girl did not wake. Before sprinkling her face with water or holding salts to her nose—measures that would have restored her senses—Fra Pasquale resolved to strip her completely. With feverish anxiety, he unlaced her bodice and tore open the buttons of her white chemise; the garment fell away, exposing to the libertine hermit's gaze the treasures of a beautiful, virginal bosom. Thus liberated from the constriction the bodice had imposed upon her, the young girl's breathing grew steady; little by little, her lips regained their lovely coral hue, and her cheeks flushed crimson once more.

Fra Pasquale gazed upon her in ecstasy. Never had anything more exquisite presented itself to his avid eyes. He held his breath for fear of waking her, and as his burning pupils darted over her form, he inhaled—with flaring nostrils—the sweet fragrances emanating from that body worthy of Psyche. After a brief moment, the girl slowly lifted her long lashes, then the lids of her large, dark eyes; for a moment, she remained motionless and silent. She had not yet fully regained the use of her mental faculties; the lingering faintness still clouded her mind. But this lasted only a few seconds. Suddenly, she let out a piercing shriek from her half-parted lips and sat upright on the bed, crossing her arms over her bosom to modestly shield it from the hermit's gaze, a gaze that seemed to sear her very flesh.

"Where am I, my God? Where am I?" she asked, weeping.

"Fear not, child," Friar Pasquale replied to her, "You are in your own home. Here, you are mistress and queen."

"No! No! Let me go!" the young girl cried out, seized by terror, and she attempted to leap from the bed.

But the friar held her back, pinning her firmly within his arms. Then began a formidable struggle between the fragile creature—defending her virtue with desperate energy—and the obscene hermit, who, dominated by bestial passion, retained nothing of the human within him, not even in his face, shaggy and parched by the sun. Virtue prevailed. Disheveled, with her hair streaming loose over her head and bosom, her face drenched in sweat and tears, the young girl, having managed to break free, fell to her knees and clasped the hermit's legs, pleading:

"Let me go, Father! Let me go, or I shall die!"

And truly, her paroxysm had reached such a pitch that it gave cause for fear, if for nothing else, then for her very sanity. Friar Pasquale realized that this girl, reduced to such a desperate state of mind, would yield him no pleasure; and since he had no intention of giving her up, he shifted his tactics. He feigned deep sorrow for what had occurred, repentance for his transgression, and begged the young girl's forgiveness using the sweetest, most insinuating, and most humble words. It had been but a momentary delirium. He had merely wished to revive her and restore her to health. The sight of such beauty had driven him mad. If he failed to obtain her forgiveness, he would die a damned soul. All the life remaining to him—even were he to inflict upon himself every manner of suffering—would not suffice to atone for his sin.

Once raised to her feet and redressed in her clothes, the young woman gradually regained her composure; and, innocent as she was, she put her faith in the deceitful words of the cunning hermit. He carried his hypocrisy so far as to have her kneel beside him on the mat in the adjoining chamber, before the crucifix, and declare that she wholeheartedly forgave him for his outburst. Her trust restored, the young woman did not hesitate to reveal the reason that had led her there. She had a lover who was pledged to marry her. He had departed some time ago, yet she had still received no news from him. She longed to know what had befallen him, whether her Felicino still loved her, whether he would return, and whether he would truly make her his wife. She had been told that an anchorite resided there, a holy man who could reveal all these things to her, and even help her attain the object of her ardent desire. That was why she had come.

But as she was descending the slope, a voice within her had urged her not to proceed; she had attempted to retrace her steps, but had fallen—and from that moment on, she remembered nothing more. Fra Pasquale offered her words of comfort. He feigned to consult certain ancient tomes kept in

his laboratory; then, fetching a glass flask, he filled it with water and, letting fall into it, drop by drop from a small vial, a greenish liquid that swirled in opalescent currents before slowly dissolving, he revealed to her what he claimed to have divined from his experiments. Her lover would indeed marry her, he still loved her, but another woman sought to steal his affection away; it was therefore necessary to neutralize that woman's machinations.

"My God, what am I to do?" the poor creature cried out, wringing her hands in anguish and weeping bitterly.

"Calm yourself, and take heart, my child. I will give you a potion; upon drinking it, your lover will come to loathe your rival."

"Will it cost a great deal?" asked the naive young girl, raising her hands to her ears to remove the large gold earrings that adorned them.

"It will indeed cost a great deal," replied the hermit, "But I offer it to you free of charge, in atonement for my transgression."

Drawing forth a small vial he had kept concealed, he drank half of its contents and handed the remainder to the girl, who—thus reassured—gulped it down in a single draught. It was a potent soporific, mixed with an aphrodisiac no less powerful. Then he bade her farewell, escorting her as far as the threshold of his hut. The girl crossed the small valley, swift as a gazelle, and clambered up the fateful path from which she had earlier fallen. Meanwhile, Fra Pasquale, having returned to his laboratory, hastened to ingest several spoonfuls of caffeine as an antidote to the soporific. As for the aphrodisiac, he reasoned that it would do him more good than harm. Thus, he set off in pursuit of the young girl. He found her lying at the top of the slope upon a carpet of moss; lifting her into his arms once more, for she showed no sign of life, he carried her back to the bed where, only moments before, he had attempted to violate her.

The young woman did not emerge from the hut until the following morning. She was unrecognizable. She appeared utterly broken. Only a rose, torn from its stem by the fury of a storm and trampled underfoot, could have offered any idea of her state. About a month had passed since the heinous deed committed by Fra Pasquale when, one morning, a young man of about twenty-five arrived at the hut. Dressed in rustic country garb, and offering a silver coin, he asked the hermit for a remedy to cure his mother of a severe colic that had seized her. Fra Pasquale set some dried leaves taken from his herbal store to boil in a glass flask. But as he blew upon the embers to revive the fire, he felt himself seized by the neck and hurled to the ground.

He had no opportunity to defend himself; for, still gripping him by the throat with one hand, the young man sprang onto his chest with the agility of a wildcat, and, pinning him down with his knees to hold him fast, he strangled him. Having carried out the murder, the young man went to surrender himself to the Bargello of Collevecchio. He confessed his crime. A trial was convened, he was found guilty, and—as I have already recounted—on the 7th of July, I hanged him. It was Felice Rovina, the lover of the young woman who had been violated; upon his return, she had apprised him of the indignity she had suffered.

Informed of the matter shortly after Rovina's arrest, Monsignor Fiscale dispatched men from Rome to search Fra Pasquale's hut. In this manner, he came to learn the full truth; moreover, with the riches discovered therein, he was able to recoup—with interest—both the bounty paid for Perilli and all subsequent disbursements.

Chapter XIII

I continue the chronological account of my "operations" with the 56th execution, which I carried out in Viterbo on December 18, 1802, by means of the gallows upon the person of Domenico Guidi. The death sentence was read to him at 10:00 PM, to be carried out at 11:00 PM, a most rare occurrence in the history of Papal justice, which typically allowed the condemned ample time to repent and attend to the salvation of his soul. The man in question was a young fellow of twenty-five, madly in love with a well-to-do girl who had barely reached the age of sixteen.

His courtship had always been opposed by the girl's relatives; yet she loved him with all her heart, and there was simply no way to dissuade her from her resolve to marry Guidi whether her parents liked it or not. They would meet at night in a stable within the girl's home, hidden from everyone's eyes; there, the suitor would sneak in surreptitiously, sometimes waiting for hours on end. The relationship between the two had been going on for quite some time, to their mutual satisfaction. But one day, Pepita—for that was the young maiden's name—was informed by her mother that her father had promised her hand in marriage to a countryman: a wealthy, older man, but one possessed of considerable real estate and wealth.

"Are you mad?" the young girl cried out in alarm. "I will not marry your money-grubbing bumpkin—not even if you were to kill me!"

"Why?" her mother asked gently.

"Because... because... because I simply do not want to marry! I want to remain a spinster."

"Pepita, take heed: your father is not joking. He is absolutely determined to see this marriage take place; if you resist, things will go very badly for you."

The girl uttered not another word; she gave no sign of either assent or dissent. Consequently, her mother judged that she was not far from yielding to her father's will, and said to her husband: "Let her be for a few days. She is battling her final hesitations."

That evening, Pepita met her lover at their usual rendezvous, and the first words she addressed to him were these:

"Take me away."

"Why?" asked Domenico Guidi, astonished.

"Take me away, or else I'll kill myself."

"But tell me, for God's sake, what has happened to drive you to such a risky proposal? Were we discovered?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Then, my father wants to marry me off at all costs. And once he gets an idea into his head, he is not a man to be swayed from his purpose."

"Your mother?"

"She is too weak to stand up to him."

"Your brother?"

"He is just as greedy for money—if not more so—than my father; and the suitor is rich."

"Do they intend to fleece him?"

"No. But you understand that where there is plenty, it tends to overflow."

"Perfectly. But where am I to take you? If we stay in Viterbo, we'll be discovered immediately…"

"That's a fine mess."

"And on the other hand, if we leave the town, where shall I take you? How will I find food for both of us?"

"We'll work."

"It certainly won't be the will to work that I'll lack. But it will take time before we find employment. And in the meantime?"

"I'll take care of that. I have some jewelry, I have some belongings, and I even have a few scudi put aside."

"In that case, you decide. I am ready."

"We must act quickly."

"Not tonight, I assume?"

"Tomorrow."

"So be it."

For that night, love was set aside. The two young lovers parted ways immediately. Pepita went back up into the house, while Domenico headed out; but as he left, he thought he saw a shadow flit across the moonlit wall. He was slightly unnerved by this and stood listening for a few moments. Seeing nothing, he murmured:

"I must have been mistaken."

And he slipped quickly out through the small wicket gate set within the large, closed entrance doors.

Chapter XIV

The following evening, Domenico arrived at their rendezvous earlier than usual, only to find Pepita already waiting, ready to go, with two enormous bundles of belongings.

"Where do you intend to take those?" Guidi asked her, evidently embarrassed.

"With us."

"But if we run into any constables, they'll take us for thieves; they'll question us, we'll have to give our names, and then goodbye, escape."

"Nevertheless, it is necessary, if we are to survive."

For the sake of his girl, the young man resigned himself to running the risk of arrest. He gathered the two bundles into his arms and headed toward the exit. But just as he was about to step into the entryway, he felt himself seized by the collar; a hand clutching a knife rose above him and struck down repeatedly, aiming to wound him. Fortunately, the bundles shielded him from the blows, and he sustained nothing more than a very slight—almost imperceptible—graze to his neck. However, seeing that his unknown assailant was blocking his path of escape and showed no inclination to let him pass, he drew his own knife from his pocket; snapping the spring to lock the blade in place, he assumed a defensive stance. Meanwhile, the two bundles had fallen to the ground.

The two blades clashed; Domenico Guidi's knife, having parried his adversary's weapon with a swift, skillful movement, plunged into the man's neck, sinking in up to the hilt. Guidi felt a splash of warm blood wet his face as he watched his antagonist's body first stagger, then collapse. Pepita had lingered in the stable to give her lover time to exit with the bundles. A few minutes later, she crossed the courtyard, making her way toward the gate. The sky was overcast, and it was dark. But at that very moment, a moonbeam pierced through the clouds, illuminating the bloody scene. "Wretch!" the wretched woman exclaimed, stifling her voice. "You have killed my brother!"

Then, stooping down, she gathered up the two bundles and, carrying them, vanished into the stable. Guidi ran his hand across his forehead, as if to brush away a troubling dream. The damp stickiness of the blood that stained him, however, instantly jolted him back to reality; he turned and fled desperately, aimlessly. Suddenly, he felt himself seized by four sturdy arms, and a brusque, imperious voice demanded:

"You are wounded. Where did the knifing take place?"

He offered no reply. Thereupon, the two constables who had apprehended him wrested the knife—still dripping with blood—from his hand, bound his wrists tightly, and hauled him off to the city jail. By then, his mind had regained a measure of composure, enabling him to devise a strategy for his defense.

When subjected to an initial interrogation by the chief constable, he claimed that he had encountered a drunkard on the street, a man who was on the verge of stumbling right into him. He had rebuked the fellow, whereupon the man had lunged at him with an open knife, intent on striking him. He had simply been forced to defend himself. He had felt the stranger's blood splatter across his face and had fled. As for what had become of the other man, he professed to have no idea. When pressed to specify the exact location of the altercation, however, he hesitated slightly, a hesitation that immediately aroused the chief constable's suspicions regarding the veracity of his story.

The chief constable ordered him locked away in the most secure cell; he then set out personally, accompanied by two jailers, to scour the city in search of information. As it was the dead of night, however, they were unable to gather any intelligence and were ultimately forced to return to the jail empty-handed, having discovered nothing. Pepita, distraught with grief, had meanwhile retreated to her room; having unpacked her bundles, she put everything away, taking care to ensure that every trace of her attempted escape vanished. It was a terrible night for her. She longed to find a way to go downstairs to aid her brother—should he still be alive—but she feared arousing suspicions that might ultimately reveal the truth of the crime and unmask the culprit.

Every few moments, she strained her ears to catch any sound that might reach her—any clue from which she could surmise whether her brother's injury had been discovered. Yet the deepest silence reigned throughout the house; and, utterly drained both emotionally and physically, she finally drifted into sleep just as dawn was breaking. Shortly thereafter, a great commotion roused her. The entire house was in an uproar; confused voices, curses, and lamentations could be heard everywhere. A servant had discovered the already-stiffened corpse of the master's son in the entrance hall and had rushed to alert the father. The tragic news spread like wildfire in an instant, and from every quarter, the curious flocked in, eager to "view the body" and glean whatever details they could regarding the murder.

The authorities, having been informed, soon intervened and dispatched officials to gather the particulars of the case. The magistrates immediately linked the crime to the name of Domenico Guidi, who had been arrested at precisely the hour when the murder was presumed to have taken place. He

was thereupon brought into the presence of the corpse. Yet he endured the sight with utter composure: not a single muscle in his face twitched, and his pulse—which was carefully monitored—did not quicken by a single beat.

Chapter XV

Inquiries were conducted to determine whether any connection existed between the victim and his alleged killer; the outcome revealed that they had not even known one another. The illicit affair between the young woman and Guidi had been conducted with such cunning that not a whisper of it had leaked out. Indeed, it never even crossed anyone's mind that there could be any link between Pepita and her brother's murderer. In short, the wheels of justice lacked the guiding thread that would have led them to uncover the perpetrator of the crime.

The victim was a handsome young man: physically imposing, well-proportioned, and charming. He also enjoyed a reputation as a man lucky in love. The conclusion was reached that the crime must have been the result of a personal vendetta. Some cuckolded husband, acting with the utmost caution, had likely struck the fatal blow to avenge the dishonor he had suffered. The case remained open. Meanwhile, Pepita, crushed by anguish, had resolved to enter a cloistered convent to begin her novitiate; her parents attempted to dissuade her, but in vain. The loss of her brother, occurring in such a brutal manner, served to justify her resolve. The authorities did not withhold their support. And so, the grief-stricken young woman was able to withdraw herself from all danger and all further tribulation. Domenico Guidi, however, remained in prison.

The justice system had been utterly unable to establish any concrete link between the mysterious murder and Guidi's flight through the streets of Viterbo—bloody and armed with a knife—on that very same night. Yet, deep within the mind of the investigating magistrate lay the firm conviction that such a link *must* exist; he therefore decided to keep Guidi detained until such time as chance—or some unforeseen turn of events—might yield a clue, thereby allowing the investigation to resume and the tangled knot of the mystery to be unraveled. He had been assigned highly skilled informers as cellmates, tasked with extorting from him—whether through confession, a half-confidence, or an imprudent revelation—some insight into his true nature, his deeds, his dealings with others, and so forth.

Yet Domenico Guidi—whether he knew it or merely suspected it—remained hermetically sealed within himself. He was tormented by sudden interrogations, day and night, both inside and outside his cell. Every manner of psychological ploy was employed, yet all proved futile. The investigator had taken into account the minutest details and explored every conceivable angle to

construct a narrative—a drama whose climax would be an act of murder committed by Guidi—but his imagination had been exhausted without achieving its objective.

Then, one day, news reached him that Pepita, confined within the cloister of the Poor Clares, had been discovered to be pregnant. Without a moment's delay, he proceeded to the convent; having secured an audience with the Mother Superior, he questioned her as to whether she deemed it possible that such a scandal could have occurred within the monastery walls. This possibility, however, was absolutely ruled out. Cloistered life was observed with such strict rigidity that neither the novices nor the nuns could engage in any form of intimate interaction, whether with outsiders or with one another with persons of the opposite sex. The event, therefore, must have taken place prior to her entry into the convent.

The judge gathered further information at Pepita's home; the girl's mother, crushed by the news of her daughter's condition, recounted to him the marriage plans her husband had arranged for Pepita, as well as the girl's vehement rejections when the proposal was put to her. This proved to be a sudden ray of light for the investigator. Upon returning to his office and secluding himself in the solitude of his private chambers, he engaged in a long and profound meditation, through which he finally succeeded in reconstructing the intricate web of the crime.

Chapter XVI

Late at night, he had Domenico Guidi brought before him; once alone with him, he addressed him thus:

"I have news for you: Pepita, your mistress, has been confirmed to be with child."

The lamp placed upon the interrogator's desk cast its light directly upon him; the judge, however—shielded by a green silk shade—remained in the shadows, intently studying the effect his words produced upon the accused's face. At that revelation, Guidi's complexion turned cadaverous.

"Do you still persist in denying," the judge resumed, in the same harsh, dry tone of voice, "that you killed your girl's brother?"

Guidi did not reply.

"Far wiser than you, Pepita has confessed the whole truth, concealing nothing from justice—neither your illicit affair, nor the marriage plans devised by her father (and conveyed to her by her mother, only to be rejected by her), nor the consequences that ensued."

The accused appeared utterly stunned; his moral faculties were paralyzed, as were his physical ones. He believed everything had been laid bare, and he felt as though he were dying.

"Domenico Guidi," the judge continued, lending his voice a less severe inflection and speaking to him in an almost paternal manner, "only candor can improve your lot and mitigate the gravity of your crime."

The accused fell into the trap; hoping to escape the gallows—the image of which seemed to loom before his very eyes—he stammered:

"It was in self-defense."

"I know. You were taken by surprise…"

"And struck repeatedly. Had it not been for Pepita's two bundles—into which the blade of his knife sank deep—I would have been the one killed."

That revelation regarding the two bundles sparked a sudden insight in the judge's mind. He had given them to his mistress, Pepita. What could they have contained? Surely, his personal effects. And to what end? To take them along. It was, therefore, a flight for which they had prepared. Had the murdered man struck Guidi? The surprise on his face was evident.

"Where did you intend to take Pepita after your escape?" the judge asked point-blank.

"I don't know. It had all happened so suddenly that I hadn't had time to think of anything. We simply wanted to get away from Viterbo. We would have left the city and then traveled far away."

"With the burden of the belongings Pepita was carrying with her, is that not so?"

"I possessed no means of my own. It was her wish. She told me she would bring her things along. Nothing more than her own things."

The mere idea of being regarded as an accomplice to a domestic theft—on the girl's behalf, no less—repelled Guidi far more than the very bloody crime he had committed. Little by little, the highly skilled interrogator (all the while feigning full knowledge of the facts based on Pepita's supposed revelations) drew from the prisoner's lips every minute detail of the affair: from the inception of his illicit relationship with the girl to his desperate flight after murdering her brother. It thus became abundantly clear that the brother had been aware of his sister's clandestine affair and had been keeping a close watch over her, specifically to ensure that her planned marriage would not fall through. Having achieved such a significant—and wholly unexpected—breakthrough, the interrogator dismissed Guidi, urging him to reiterate his confession the following day before the presiding court, and holding out the possibility of a lenient sentence, perhaps even a full pardon.

The following day, the accused repeated his full confession; he was then remanded to prison. To avert a public scandal—given that the case involved a young woman confined within a convent—the court, in its written judgment, glossed over the events preceding the crime and sentenced Guidi to death by hanging for murder. And the sentence was carried out immediately, just as I had foreseen. When Guidi reached the foot of the scaffold, he was more dead than alive. The pronouncement of the verdict had struck him so profoundly—coming as it did when he was so far from expecting it—that he uttered not another word. He had lost the power of speech.

Chapter XVII

On March 30, 1805, I was obliged to travel to Fermo, the ancient capital of the Marche region, to carry out the hanging of a young man of good family who had committed both murder and rape: the murder against the person of his former fiancée's father, and the rape against the young woman herself. His name was Luigi Masi. A man of an extremely violent nature, he had fallen in love with Elvira Placenti, the daughter of a haberdasher who kept a shop in the town square of Fermo; after courting her for a considerable time, he asked her father for her hand in marriage. The father consented, but only on the condition that Luigi secure a stable position for himself before the wedding. The young woman was as shrewd as she was graceful, and upon her father's death, she would have been perfectly capable of running the shop on her own. Consequently, her father insisted that her husband possess a separate occupation. Luigi, as I have mentioned, belonged to a well-to-do (though large) family, and he could not rely solely on his paternal inheritance to sustain himself. Moreover, he had a reputation as a spendthrift and a carouser. Time—and a wife—would surely reform him; and indeed, he solemnly vowed that they would. Yet Elvira's father, a widower whose only child was this daughter, was determined to ensure her happiness, for he loved her as the very apple of his eye.

Masi, blinded by love, promised everything that Elvira and her father asked of him; however, he took great care *not* to actually fulfill those promises. Nevertheless, since the young woman was equally in love with him, they might well have reached an understanding on this matter. Luigi lavished infinite tenderness upon her and offered her constant proofs of his genuine affection. Yet, he was plagued by jealousy. And this jealousy, little by little, became a torment for the betrothed couple. Working in the shop—beautiful as she was—she naturally had her admirers; she gave them no encouragement whatsoever, yet she could hardly turn them out of the shop when they entered under the pretext of making purchases. This led to a host of quarrels on Masi's part: with his future father-in-law, with his fiancée, and with the customers themselves, whom he had developed the nasty habit of provoking. Consequently, her father would say to Elena:

"My dear girl, Masi is not the man for you; we must let him go. Otherwise, sooner or later, this is bound to end badly."

The poor girl suffered deeply over this; she understood the validity of her father's objections, yet she loved her Luigi and could not bring herself to break things off with him. And so she would tell her father:

"I want to marry him; once we are husband and wife, he will settle down."

But her father would hear nothing of it. One day, upon learning that a young man from the village—a strapping, charming, and enterprising fellow—had lingered for a long time in his fiancée's shop while he himself was out hunting, Luigi stormed in and made a terrible scene. In the heat of his fury, he raised his hands against both her and her father, shouting:

"You wretches! If you think you can deceive me, I'll kill you both!"

He then stormed out of the shop where a crowd, drawn by the commotion, had already gathered, and headed straight for the young man to challenge him. At first, the young man tried to fend him off and dispel the jealous suspicions that had taken root in Masi's mind; but when Masi hurled the insult "coward" at him, he struck back. Both men drew their knives and lunged at one another. Both men were vigorous and possessed of an indomitable spirit, and the scene would have ended badly had not, by good fortune, some courageous friends intervened in time to avert a catastrophe; as it was, the two combatants had managed only to inflict minor scratches upon one another.

Yet the scandal resonated deeply throughout the town. The Prince-Archbishop summoned Elvira's father and admonished him to ensure that the relationship between his daughter and Masi was brought to an end. Both, in any case, had already reached that decision, and the betrothal was definitively broken off. Masi attempted several times to make peace and to win Elvira back, even without her father's knowledge. But he did not succeed, for the young woman had grown disgusted with him, and perhaps the seeds of a new love were already beginning to sprout in her heart. Indeed, Luigi learned that the young man with whom he had nearly come to blows was secretly frequenting Elvira's home. And so, he resolved to take his revenge: not upon him, but upon his former fiancée and her father.

One evening, at twilight, Elvira and Placenti were returning to Fermo from Porto, where they had spent half the day, ascending the slope that led to the town. They reached the halfway point only after night had fully fallen, having lingered there for far too long. A profound silence reigned all around them. At a bend in the road, they spotted a shadowy figure lying in wait; as they drew near, the faint glimmer of the few stars allowed them to recognize Luigi Masi. The father's foreboding heart warned

him that danger was imminent, and—driven by his deep affection—he stepped forward a pace or two to shield his beloved daughter. Aside from the three of them, there was not a living soul in sight.

Masi lunged like lightning at the old man and, striking him repeatedly with his knife, plunged the blade into his chest, laying him dead upon the ground. Then, with equal swiftness, he seized the terrified girl and wounded her two or three times: though only slightly, for his hand was trembling, stirred as he was by the passion of love.

"My Giggi, spare my life!" cried the wretched Elvira.

Her touching voice altered the frenzied man's train of thought. He resolved to possess the girl he adored; embracing her around the waist—and despite her vigorous resistance—he pinned her against the rocky cliff face through which the road was cut, and violently took her. Arrested that very night, Luigi Masi confessed his crime, attempting to justify it as the blinding madness of passion. Yet, no matter what influence his family brought to bear, they could not save him from the gallows to which he was condemned. He died a penitent, fortified by the rites of religion—though not without courage.

Chapter XVIII

This singular trial reminds me of another that took place in Rome a few months later, one of which I shall speak briefly, after first mentioning the executions I carried out in the interim. I have already noted how the rampant scourge of banditry right at Rome's gates prompted the authorities to institute a much more active system of surveillance. Indeed, toward the end of May, rural constables apprehended, just outside Porta Angelica, near Monte Mario, two highwaymen: Filippo Mazzocchi and Giuseppe Guglia, whom I hanged at Ponte Sant'Angelo and quartered on June 10th; Nicola Alicolis, whom I myself hanged and quartered on October 1st at La Merluzza; and Santino Moretti, who was likewise condemned to the gallows and subsequently to quartering. This latter execution was carried out on that very same day by my assistant at Il Ponticello, just outside Porta San Paolo, as I was occupied at La Merluzza. In the meantime, on September 4th, I had traveled to Iesi to hang the fratricide Sebastiano Spadoni; and on September 23rd—also in that same month—I went to Civitavecchia to hang Luigi Giovansanti, a galley slave who had murdered a fellow convict within the prison confines.

Thus, on October 9th, I carried out yet another execution: one that caused a tremendous stir, both due to the motive behind the crime (love and jealousy, much like the case of Masi of Fermo) and due to the perpetrator of the misdeed: Gioacchino, son of the late Bernardino Rinaldi, a lamb butcher who plied his trade near Campo de' Fiori. And it was precisely at Campo de' Fiori—to ensure the maximum deterrent effect—that the execution took place. Gioacchino Rinaldi was a man in his forties: and indeed, well into them. Coarse in person, in feature, and in manner (yet amply endowed with property and coin) he had taken as his wife a beautiful girl from Trastevere named Giacinta, who had consented to the will of her parents, rather than to her own inclination, in marrying him. Giacinta felt no decided aversion toward her husband; she tolerated him, despite his ugliness, and showed him gratitude for the lavish indulgences he heaped upon her: dresses of exorbitant cost, precious jewels, and, as for the table, whatever her palate might desire. Despite his advanced years, Gioacchino remained robust and ardent in his conjugal endeavors, so much so that his bride found herself with child almost immediately. A woman possessed of merely material appetites might well have found contentment and happiness with him.

Unfortunately, Giacinta knew she was beautiful, for she had been told so a thousand times by the most charming, courteous, and gallant young men of Trastevere. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes: at times languid and dewy, dripping with voluptuousness; at others phosphorescent and flashing with passion; her small, red, crimson mouth, between whose lips gleamed teeth of dazzling whiteness: sharp as a little mouse's, made equally for giving kisses and bites, both equally sweet; her lovely oval face, with skin of golden-brown hue, softer than velvet; her round, plump neck; her winsome head, crowned with black, curly hair; her small, rosy, diaphanous ears, inviting the whispering of sweet words of love; her superb figure: lithe and slender, yet full and voluptuous, with a towering bosom and powerful hips that swayed with her every step; her white, smooth hands; Her arched, supple feet had already stirred up burning desires and elicited declarations to which she had not always remained indifferent. Many prominent figures and many peasants had courted her assiduously, extolling her spirit, already, by nature, lively and imaginative.

Chapter XIX

Even in her husband's shop, she was not without her admirers. Yet perhaps she would not have failed in her wifely duties had Rinaldi not committed the error of assigning her, as a shop-boy, a fair-haired, rosy-cheeked youth with cerulean eyes: a sort of cherub in a white apron, often stained with blood and strewn with the feathers of chickens and game birds. He soon began to court her ardently. At first, Giacinta merely laughed it off. But later, during the long hours she spent alone with him while her husband was out making purchases, she began to listen to him simply to relieve her boredom; and, swept away by passion, she eventually gave herself to him, right there in the shop itself, with the shutters left ajar, during the sultry hours of the day and again in the evening, while awaiting Gioacchino's return. Love is by nature imprudent, and before long, the illicit affair between the beautiful lamb-butcher's wife and the shop-boy became common knowledge: not only among the shopkeepers but also among all the servant girls who frequented Campo de' Fiori. The only one left in the dark was her husband. Yet there was someone who took upon themselves the grim task of alerting him, via an anonymous letter that provided him with every specific detail he needed to catch her in the act.

The lamb-butcher, who had never experienced even the slightest pang of jealousy, and who had been anxiously awaiting the day Giacinta would bear him a child, was utterly devastated by this fatal news. His entire happiness was shattered; for him, the future had ceased to exist. The fruit his wife carried in her womb might not be his own. Unless he intervened, a bastard would soon enter his home. And even if the child *was* his, who could ever dispel this agonizing doubt? It had to end. He must kill the lover, his wife, and the unborn child she carried. He left the shop, telling them he would not return until late that night. Instead, at dusk, he took up a position where he could observe what was happening inside the shop. As the crowd on the square began to thin out and the lamp was lit within the shop, he saw Giacinta and the apprentice exchanging caresses and tender gestures. Then the apprentice stepped to the threshold of the shop, cast a glance outside, and closed the shutters, leaving open a narrow slit through which a thin thread of light filtered. Gioacchino curbed his impatience and waited another five minutes: minutes that, in the desperate anguish consuming him, felt like five centuries. Then he crossed the street and burst into the shop like a bomb.

The two lovers were there, in the back, locked in an embrace, delirious with passion. Rinaldi had not thought to arm himself with a knife, but he found one lying on the counter; he snatched it up, and before they could recover from the terrible shock, he first slit the apprentice's throat like a lamb, nearly severing his head; then he plunged the blade repeatedly into the chest and belly of his woman, for he sought to destroy both her and the fetus she carried. And there were two fetuses! Attracted by the screams of the dying, passersby rushed to the scene, followed shortly by the guards, who arrested Rinaldi who, mad with fury, continued to plunge his knife into his wife's belly, just as he had done to her lover, who was already dead. Once the trial commenced, Rinaldi confessed everything, showing not the slightest remorse for his heinous deed; on the contrary, he declared himself overjoyed to have killed his wife and the two bastards she carried in her womb. Sentenced to death by bludgeoning and quartering, he refused all religious solace and died stoically.

Chapter XX

One December morning—cold, yet beautiful—a man of about thirty-five entered a tavern in Porto Recanati. Of athletic build, he wore a long, flowing reddish-brown beard that cascaded over his chest, and long hair, naturally ringleted, that fell down over his shoulders. He was dressed in brown velvet hunting attire, with large leather boots that rose well above his knees; a broad leather belt girded his waist, and a red silk kerchief was tied around his neck. A soft, wide-brimmed hat shaded his handsome, masculine face, and beneath his thick eyebrows, two hawk-like eyes darted: at times black, at others yellow and iridescent. He carried a rifle slung over his shoulders, though he had no dogs with him. After casting a quick glance around the tavern's front room, he passed into the second; he did the same there, before stepping out through the back door—which opened onto a deserted little lane, *a rez-de-chaussée*[xiii] as the French would say—and looking out into the street.

Finally he re-entered, apparently satisfied with his inspection for, turning to the innkeeper (who had followed his every step), he clapped him familiarly on the shoulder and said:

"You old devil of an innkeeper, surely you've got something to feed me! I'm ravenous, hungry enough to eat a wolf, and I assure you, I'd even eat your own carcass, were it not for the fact that it looks as tough as an old billy goat's."

The innkeeper smiled beatifically. Perhaps he had some fourteen-year-old animal carcass of a more or less domestic variety stashed away, and felt that the perfect opportunity had finally arrived to unload it while reaping a handsome profit.

"Mind you, though," the stranger resumed, "hunger does not preclude taste. So if, by any chance, you happen to have some old skinned cat lying around that you were planning to serve me... well, you'd have sorely miscalculated." The innkeeper was aghast.

"Could this man truly be the devil himself?" he wondered inwardly. "He has read my very thoughts."

The innkeeper's hesitation increasingly convinced the hunter that the man harbored treacherous intentions toward him. He therefore took him gently by the ear and commanded:

"Take me to the kitchen."

"Nothing is ready yet at this hour," the poor wretch stammered, "but I can serve you like a prince, if you have a little patience."

And he began to shout at the top of his lungs:

"Marianna! Marianna!"

Marianna was his respectable better half, a sort of human cannonball who seemed to roll across the floor rather than walk. She arrived in haste at her husband's summons, mewling in a faint voice:

"My dear Menicuccio, what is it?"

"The gentleman wishes to eat, and to eat *well*," the innkeeper murmured, emphasizing his words.

"Now that's what I like to hear!" the stranger exclaimed, casting a sidelong glance at them both.

"I shall make you a fish stew."

"Excellent—provided the fish is fresh."

"Fresh? You'd better believe it! Menicuccio, go fetch it from Petronio; he arrived this very morning on his fishing boat."

The innkeeper took his leave, only too happy to escape the stranger's probing gaze.

"Then," Marianna continued, "I shall serve you a *pollo alla cacciatora*[xiv]."

"And how many months has that chicken been dead?"

"I am astonished at the question! I shall take it straight from the coop; indeed, if Your Excellency would care to shoot it yourself, you will find the meat all the more tender and flavorful."

"Agreed. And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I shall slice you some Fabriano salami, the kind so rich it practically drips with flavor. It is sent to me by my brother, who oversees the kitchens for His Holiness and several Cardinals."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the hunter, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth as if already savoring the taste.

In the blink of an eye, the stout innkeeper set the table, spreading a pristine white cloth over the rough board and arranging upon it some coarse—yet clean, almost gleaming—tableware. Then she brought forth bread, fresh from the oven and still warm, a jug of wine, and a plate of salami.

"Is this wine spoiled?" the stranger asked, pouring some into his glass.

"I'm surprised you'd ask. It's Sangiovese[xv] from Romagna, and of the finest quality."

The stranger downed the glass and, clicking his tongue in satisfaction, said:

"Excellent! You'd best prepare for two, as I'm expecting a friend who arranged to meet me here."

"That shows he knows his stuff. Not to brag, but you won't find food, drink, or lodging quite like the *Caval Marino*[xvi] anywhere else in the entire Marche region."

"Do you have rooms to let?"

"With beds fit for newlyweds. If you'd care to see them…"

"Later, later."

"Very well, then; shall I wring the chicken's neck, or would you prefer to shoot it?"

"The sound of the shot would draw a crowd."

"Not a chance; there's not a soul around here."

"In that case, let's see."

"Stand ready; I'll send it out to you. Mind you don't miss, though: otherwise the poor creature will get spooked, come down with a fever, and its meat will lose all its flavor."

"Have no fear."

The landlady went into the kitchen and opened the coop; two young chickens scurried out and headed toward the adjoining room. Two shots rang out instantly, and Marianna, rushing in, found them both lying on the floor, their heads shattered. The traveler was still standing there, the two pistols he had drawn from his belt still in his hands.

"What! You killed them with pistols?" the woman asked, her eyes widening in utter astonishment.

"I certainly did."

Just then, Menicuccio returned carrying a shallow basket covered with leafy sprigs.

"Here's the fish: it's still alive," he said with a smile, glancing at the traveler. "And along with the fish, I've brought you a friend." Indeed, following the innkeeper was a man in his fifties: short, stocky, and pot-bellied, with a round nose, small eyes that were lively and darting, and a wide mouth framed by small, grizzled sideburns. These matched the ringlets of hair covering his temples, which curled out from beneath the stiff, wide-brimmed black felt hat that completed his attire: the typical dress of a rural agent.

He walked straight up to the stranger and extended his hand, saying: "I knew you had already arrived."

"Did the innkeeper tell you? I'll bet that within an hour, everyone within a ten-mile radius will know about it. That innkeeper has a loose tongue."

"Have no fear, Paolo."

"Have I ever been afraid?"

"Just don't worry about it. You're safer here than you would be on the High Altar of St. Peter's in Rome. I'll vouch for Menicuccio."

"Let's eat, then. I'm damnably hungry."

"Business is always best settled over a meal."

Menicuccio had already brought the cutlery and a plate. The countryman sat down opposite the stranger, and together they began to make short work of the salami.

"So, it's set for tonight, without fail," the newcomer said in a low voice. "Are you ready?"

"More than ready."

"And your men?"

"You can count on me."

"They have no escort. But they are a determined lot, and perhaps well-armed, too."

The hunter gave a faint, mocking smile.

"The total take will be divided into three shares."

"Two for me."

"For you alone?"

"For me and my men; the other one is for you."

"And what about any jewelry or personal valuables they might be carrying?"

"Occupational hazards."

"I want a share of those, too."

"And rightly so."

"But if, by some mischance, one of us were to end up in the hands of Mastro Titta, you'd get your share of the rope, too."

"I'll pass on that."

"You're wrong; it brings good luck."

"It brings you straight to the Devil."

"One day or another, we all have to go there."

"The later, the better."

Meanwhile, Menicuccio had served the meal—first the broth, then the chicken—and had refilled the jug three times over. A sense of well-being, and with it, a cheerful glow, began to spread across the honest countryman's face.

"Send Marianna in," he said to him, "for we wish to drink a toast to her health. She cooks admirably."

Marianna appeared, humble amidst such glory, and joined in the toast raised in her honor. The countryman then said to her:

"Now, lead us upstairs and show us to two good beds."

And so it was done.

Chapter XXI

At dusk, a post-chaise drawn by two fine Roman horses pulled up at the door of the *Albergo del Caval Marino*; inside sat two passengers. The coachman cracked his whip, and Menicuccio immediately came running, cap in hand. One of the two travelers leaned his head out and ordered:

"Bring us a bottle to drink."

"At once, Your Excellency," replied the innkeeper, heading back inside the establishment; he returned shortly thereafter with two crystal glasses set upon a handsome silver tray, and a bottle, which he poured with almost religious care.

The traveler who had ordered it passed the tray to the other with respectful deference; the latter took a sip, then murmured:

"To you."

The traveler drained his glass, then instructed Menicuccio to give the remainder to the coachman; he handed the innkeeper a scudo, saying:

"On behalf of this gentleman, who found your wine to his liking."

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the innkeeper, bowing nearly to the ground, as the carriage trotted briskly away. Two onlookers had witnessed the scene from a half-open window, hidden behind the iron grilles: the hunter and the countryman. The latter exclaimed:

"Damn it! They’re three hours ahead of schedule. A fine coup, ruined."

"Nothing is lost," the other replied. "Within half an hour, I shall have overtaken them. The ascent along the main road is long—what with all its twists and turns—and so steep that the horses will be forced to proceed at a walking pace."

"And our accomplices?"

"Leave that to me. I shall find them."

By now, the darkness had grown deep; Menicuccio, pleased with the day’s earnings, had closed up the inn, quite certain that no other patrons would be dropping by at such a late hour. The hunter, having assured himself that he was unobserved, opened the window—which stood but a few meters above the ground—and, with the swiftness and agility of a dart, dropped down into the street, his rifle slung across his shoulder. Upon touching the ground, he set off at a brisk pace, making for a narrow

side lane that led toward the mountains. The countryman, having bid him farewell, closed the window and lay down to sleep, rubbing his hands together and murmuring:

"May God save him, and the Devil protect him."

The night was pitch-black—moonless and starless. The lanterns of the post-chaise cast their reddish glow upon the road on either side. The trees loomed like gigantic human figures, stretching out their arms.

Inside the carriage, the two travelers dozed; yet they were not entirely at ease; a vague, indefinable disquiet stirred within them. Whenever they drifted off to sleep, they dreamt of brigands, assaults, and death; they would start awake in alarm, their hands instinctively reaching for the weapons they kept concealed within the pockets of their greatcoats. The road between Porto Recanati and Macerata, after traversing a stretch of flat terrain, begins to climb and wind its way along the mountainside, girding its flanks like a broad white ribbon. The hunter had kept the promise made to his country friend, who was awaiting him at Caval Marino: scrambling up steep paths through the dense brushwood, and maintaining a steady, brisk pace throughout, he had long since overtaken the post-chaise and was now lying in wait for it—concealed behind a ravine—at one of the most treacherous points along the road.

Every now and then, he would throw himself to the ground and press his ear against the soil to catch the faintest distant sounds.

"Here they come," he said suddenly. "In ten minutes, they'll be here."

And he rose instantly to take up his position.

As soon as the carriage horses reached the edge of the ravine where he lay concealed, the hunter stepped out, a pistol clutched in his right hand, while with his outstretched left, he signaled the coachman to halt. And the driver, yielding to the fear inspired by the bandit's athletic build, his absolute self-assurance, and his icy composure, obeyed.

"Whip the horses, you coward!" thundered a voice from inside the carriage; simultaneously, the report of a firearm rang out through the air.

The shot was aimed at the attacker, but instead struck one of the horses in the head, sending the beast crashing to the ground.

"Poorly aimed!" the brigand exclaimed loudly. "If you squander your powder like that, you won't have any left to blow your own brains out… should we, by chance, deem it beneath us to do the job ourselves."

Two more shots rang out in quick succession. One pierced the coachman's hat; the other grazed the brigand's shoulder, though he gave no sign of having even noticed.

"Get down, you wretch!" the attacker ordered him. "Otherwise, those gentlemen inside will end up killing you themselves."

The coachman did not need to be told twice; he leaped down from the box in a single bound, the reins still coiled tightly in his hands.

"Tie them to the box seat, demand those gentlemen's pistols, and bring them to me; I'll take care of the horses."

The driver stepped up to the left-hand door, and the traveler seated on that side immediately handed over his weapons. At that same moment, the right-hand door sprang open, and a gentleman of about thirty-five leaped out, boldly advancing toward the brigand with pistols drawn.

"Count of Lavello," the brigand said, "let's not play childish games." And simultaneously, with a blow from the butt of his pistol, he knocked one of the two weapons from the Count's hand; the pistol described a semicircle in the air before clattering to the ground, where it discharged.

"The other one is unloaded," the bandit resumed mockingly. "You would do well to follow the example of His Holiness's Courier and hand it over to me."

The traveler who had been identified as His Holiness's Courier had, in the meantime, cowered in the back of the carriage, ready to surrender unconditionally rather than risk a pistol-butt blow that might shatter his chest, a chest laden with decorations.

But the Count of Lavello appeared not in the least inclined to follow suit. He lunged at the brigand, attempting to seize his weapon; but a sudden, lightning-fast sidestep by his adversary sent him crashing backward onto the ground. And, overcome by the pain of having struck his chest and face against the cobblestones, he lost consciousness.

"Bear witness, all of you, that I could have killed him, yet I spare his life out of respect for the Holiness of Our Lord, who entrusted his precious days to this very Courier," the bandit declared (still maintaining his mocking air) as he drew a thin yet remarkably strong cord from the game-bag slung over his shoulder and bound the Count's hands behind his back and his feet together, having first dragged him to the roadside.

Once this task was complete, he returned to the post-chaise and ordered the Pope's Courier to step out. The latter did not need to be asked twice, and he, too, was bound. The last to undergo this

procedure was the coachman. "It’s just a formality, you know," the bandit remarked to him in the meantime, "a simple formality."

He then began to search the carriage, a process that took quite some time. Once this was finished, the bandit turned his attention to the travelers themselves; from whose persons he managed to extract absolutely everything with his rapacious hands. The brigand was just tossing all the finest spoils he had seized into a saddlebag when he thought he heard the sound of galloping horses. He immediately slung the sack of loot over his shoulder and plunged into the thicket, though not without hurling one final taunt at his despoiled victims:

"I had intended," he said, "to set you free myself and enable you to continue your journey; but it seems that some friends of yours are about to arrive, and I would not wish to deprive them of that pleasure."

Chapter XXII

The rogue had not been mistaken; a few moments later, a patrol of mounted constables arrived at the scene of the robbery. They untied the three captives and asked them for the details of the incident. The Pope's Courier and the Count of Lavello recounted to the officers of the law what had transpired, asserting that it must have been a large gang, led by the audacious and reckless assailant of whom they had fallen victim. Only the correspondence the Courier was carrying had been saved by the shrewd messenger, who had stuffed the packet deep into his breeches while the Count was struggling with the brigand. The interrogation of the coachman proved far more interesting.

"Are you familiar with this region?" asked the bargello of Macerata, who had arrived with the constables.

"Perfectly."

"Do you have any leads to offer?"

"I have more than one."

"Do you, by chance, know the gang leader?"

"As well as I know you."

"And who is he?"

"Paolo Salvati."

"Fear has played tricks on your eyes. Paolo Salvati, hounded from all sides, has disbanded his gang and fled into the Kingdom of Naples."

"I do not doubt your assertions, signor bargello, but I am certain that it was Paolo Salvati who attacked us."

"In that case, he could only have been alone; had he reassembled his band of brigands, we would surely have caught wind of it by now."

"I had already recognized him in Porto Recanati; while we were stopping at the *Caval Marino* to share a bottle of wine, I spotted him behind the bars of an upper-story window."

"And why did you not alert the authorities?"

"I intended to do so as soon as we reached Macerata."

"Then how is it that you took no precautions before setting out?"

"How could I have imagined—with two horses of that caliber—that he would manage to overtake us? I assumed he was headed toward Ancona."

"Very well. But, just to be safe, I hereby place you under arrest. The Monsignor Fiscale will decide your fate."

Following the bargello's orders, the constables unhitched the slain horse from the post-chaise and replaced it with one of their own. Then, having ushered the two travelers into the carriage, one of the constables took his seat on the box alongside the coachman, who had been entrusted to his custody, and the chaise set off.

"We must head straight to Porto Recanati," the bargello then told the constables who remained with him. "I'll wager Salvati has returned there. He must have received precise intelligence to attempt such a daring stroke. Perhaps we shall succeed in catching him and his accomplices unawares." The astute Bargello had judged correctly.

Having carried out the assault, Paolo Salvati returned to Porto Recanati; with a soft whistle, he summoned the countryman (who was none other than one of the most notorious fences in the region) and in the blink of an eye, the brigand and his sack of loot had taken up residence in a room at the *Caval Marino* inn. Needless to say, the contents of the sack had diminished considerably, for Salvati had already stowed away his own share—as well as that of his supposed accomplices—in a safe place. The brigand had burrowed beneath the covers and was sleeping soundly, resting from his "honorable labors," when the bargello and his constables, their numbers bolstered by reinforcements gathered in Recanati, arrived at the *Caval Marino* and secured all the entrances.

Menicuccio, who was just then opening the establishment for the day, was greatly surprised by their appearance; when questioned by the bargello, he replied that there were no guests in his inn other than two honest travelers who had arrived the previous day. The bargello ascended to the upper floor, and finding the room door ajar, he slipped inside stealthily. Yet, instead of two travelers, he found only one: Paolo Salvati, fast asleep in his bed. The other bed lay undisturbed. Exasperated, the bargello lunged at the sleeper and attempted to subdue him; but Salvati, roused abruptly from his slumber, managed to spring to his own defense, and a fierce struggle ensued. Realizing he was being overpowered, the bargello cried out for help. At that instant, Salvati snatched up his clothes, threw himself out the window, and fled, attempting to make his escape across the open fields. However, he was quickly overtaken by the constables lying in ambush, as well as by the bargello himself who, having swiftly recovered from the scuffle, was determined not to let his quarry slip through his fingers.

The fence, meanwhile, had already made his exit earlier—while Salvati was still asleep—taking the valise with him, for fear of having to share the proceeds. Paolo Salvati wore a ring with a solitaire diamond on his finger taken from the Count of Lavello, and this served as irrefutable proof of his crime; this evidence, combined with the testimony of the coachman, resulted in a sentence of death by hanging. The execution was one of the most famous I ever carried out. An immense crowd flocked to witness it from every town in the Marche region—and not only from there, but from Rome as well—drawn by the brigand's notoriety, by the sensational details of his audacious robbery, and by the fact that his victim had been a Papal Courier accompanying a figure of such high rank and importance as the Count of Lavello. Urged to repent of his misdeeds and settle his accounts with Eternal Justice, Paolo Salvati replied:

"I repent only of having fallen into the trap like a young hare."

And he spurned both confessor and comforters alike. As he was led to the place of execution, his tall figure towered above the cart. Upon reaching the scaffold, he cast a scornful glance over the crowd, then offered his neck to the noose of his own accord. The quartering went smoothly, though it was no easy task for me; it seemed as if his muscles were made of steel.

Twenty-eight days later, I was obliged to travel to Amelia to hang and quarter another highwayman. The date was May 20, 1806. His name was Pasquale Rostelli, and his exploits were utterly commonplace. A thoroughly vulgar street thief, he was in the habit of attacking cart-drivers, peasants—in short, people of little consequence—and he would often go so far as to kill a man merely to rob him of a few *baiocchi*[xvii]. Surprised by the constables, he threw himself weeping at their feet, begging for mercy—he, who had never shown mercy to anyone! Handcuffed and bound with his hands behind his back, he was transported to Amelia and put on trial. He confessed his countless crimes: murders often committed for a mere crust of bread, which he could have simply begged for as charity. Upon being informed of his death sentence, he fell into a sort of stupor; to rouse him from it, it was necessary to resort to the most powerful stimulants, and he arrived at the gallows more dead than alive. He died ignobly, just as he had lived ignobly.

Chapter XXIII

On June 9, 1806, I was obliged to travel to Rieti to carry out a sentence upon the person of Bernardino Salvati who, too, had been condemned to the gallows. He was not a malefactor in the true sense of the word, but rather a wretched soul who, in a fit of rage—provoked by jealousy and justified by the circumstances—had killed his own sworn friend. Here is how the affair unfolded: Salvati had a beautiful wife, whom he loved with great tenderness. When, after several years of marriage, she at last conceived, Bernardino's joy—for he ardently desired to have a son—knew no bounds. He seemed to have gone mad; his every thought and care was for the unborn child. He lavished enormous sums on a tiny layette and made ready to celebrate the birth with lavish festivities.

"And what if it turns out to be a girl?" someone would ask him.

"She shall be just as welcome. Besides, once we've started, there's no reason to stop. My Checca would surely be able to give me a boy eventually."

In God's good time, the long-awaited day arrived, and Bernardino Salvati's wife gave birth to a truly adorable babe, a little darling who sent the fortunate father into transports of delight. The preparations he had already made now seemed insufficient to him, and he resolved to expand upon them. On the day of the baptism, the Salvati household seemed intent on rivaling the House of Torlonia itself. The sacred ceremony was celebrated with the utmost pomp, and four two-horse carriages conveyed the newborn, the midwife, the godfather, and a throng of witnesses and guests to the church. The godfather was one of Bernardino's closest friends.

Meanwhile, back at the house, a sumptuous banquet had been prepared, a feast unlike any other. The table was laid in a spacious room adjacent to the bedroom, so that the new mother—though still confined to her bed—might nonetheless share in the jubilation. Bernardino bustled back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room, and from there to his wife's chamber, issuing orders and personally attending to anything he felt was lacking. From every side, guests showered him with compliments, congratulations, and well-wishes. The meal proved as joyful as it was bountiful and well-served. The generous flow of wine had unleashed a spirit of merriment. Some chatted, others laughed, and still others shouted in high spirits. Every now and then, a guest would make their way to the new mother's room to offer her sweets, wine, or fruit.

Returning from the kitchen, where he had gone to give some instructions, Bernardino decided he wanted to see his little tyke; he entered the marital bedroom directly, bypassing the dining room entirely. The moment he set foot inside, he froze—stunned and reeling. His child's godfather stood beside his wife's bed; she had thrown her arms around his neck and, kissing him fervently, murmured:

"How beautiful your son is! He resembles you so closely; he's the spitting image of you. You'll love him, won't you?"

Bernardino Salvati felt as if his heart had been torn apart; the blood rushed to his brain, and it was a miracle he did not drop dead on the spot. He was held upright only by the terrible spectacle of the reality unfolding before him; staggering, he retreated to the kitchen. Everything around him seemed to turn red. He was seized by a blood-fueled delirium. He snatched up a heavy mattock and stormed back into the bedroom. Checca was still clinging to the godfather; neither she nor he noticed the husband's arrival. Bernardino lunged at the friend who had betrayed his trust and his honor, plunging the mattock deep into his kidneys—four times in all—before fleeing headlong into the street, the blade dripping with hot, steaming blood. The godfather, pierced through and through by the very first blow, had not uttered a single sound. Released from the arms of Checca, which had held him fast, he fell face-down to the ground, where an enormous pool of blood immediately formed. Checca let out a piercing shriek of supreme, desperate anguish and fainted. At this cry, the guests rushed over en masse, and the cause of the dreadful scene was instantly revealed.

"It was to be expected," said one woman; "Checca has always been reckless."

"It was something everyone knew," murmured another; "Bernardino was perhaps the only one who remained in the dark."

Meanwhile, the constables had arrested Salvati; brought before the bargello, he confessed everything and provided the fullest details regarding the incident. Once the trial commenced, Bernardino Salvati repeated his confessions before the judges, making not the slightest attempt to mitigate his own culpability. He was in the grip of utter apathy. One could see in him a man who no longer cared for life: or worse, for whom life had become a burden he wished to cast off as quickly as possible. Sentenced to the gallows, as I have mentioned, he performed his final devotions without either reluctance or enthusiasm. I hanged him on the morning of July 12th; throughout the ordeal—neither while traversing the city streets, which were packed with onlookers, nor while ascending the scaffold—did he betray the slightest sign of emotion. His wife followed him a few hours later, having been struck down by a violent puerperal fever.

Chapter XXIV

On August 13th of that same year, 1806, I was obliged to travel to Terracina to execute two highwaymen—Giuseppe Pistillo, known as "Fatino," and Giuseppe Chiappa—who had been sentenced to be hanged and subsequently quartered. Pistillo enjoyed immense popularity, for he belonged to that breed of likable brigands around whom legends are woven. He never inflicted cruelty upon his victims; indeed, unless compelled by the necessity of self-defense, he never resorted to the use of weapons. It is true, however, that he possessed Herculean strength and hands firmer and more unyielding than a vise. If he seized a man by the throat, that unfortunate wretch was as certain to meet his end as if he had fallen into my own hands, destined to be dispatched to the next world. He never molested poor wayfarers or cart-drivers; he reserved his attentions solely for the "big jobs." He had a particular weakness for aristocratic traveling carriages and mail coaches. Whenever he chanced upon a country estate or a peasant’s cottage and requested shelter or sustenance, he was certain to be served like a prince; for he paid handsomely—if not on the spot, then at the very first opportunity he had to return, well-stocked with coin. He was also lavish in his almsgiving to the poor. A multitude of anecdotes are told about him, tales that do honor to his heart and magnificently portray his character. I shall recount one of the most touching among them.

Pistillo was in the habit of frequently visiting a princely estate that had been leased to the father of a large family, a man who earned an honest living by working the land himself and employing tenant farmers to assist him. His arrival at the estate was always greeted with joy, for he brought little gifts for the women and children, and kept company with the master of the house and the men, to whom he also offered sound advice regarding their crops, and the more or less opportune times to procure the supplies they needed or to sell their produce.

Having been away for over a year—since harassment by the authorities had compelled him to move to another region—Pistillo arrived at the estate one night and was welcomed with his customary affability. They served him supper, and the tenant farmer kept him company while everyone else went off to bed. Pistillo, however, sensed that something extraordinary—and far from cheerful—must have befallen that household. No matter how hard he tried, the master could not manage to appear cheerful or content. He drank, yet the wine seemed to catch in his throat, and he set down his glass while it was

still half full. Suddenly, Pistillo paused—knife still in hand, with which he had been slicing a piece of cheese—and, fixing his gaze upon the farmer, spoke in a dry, stern tone:

"Paolone, you are deceiving me."

"Do you truly think me capable of that?" the farmer retorted instantly, evidently offended.

"You no longer place your trust in me," the brigand continued. "You are hiding something from me."

"What could I possibly have to hide from you?" Paolone asked with a deep sigh.

"I do not know; if I knew, I would not be asking you. Some worry, some secret sorrow has changed you. Paolone, let us not waste time with idle chatter: what is it that afflicts you?"

"Perhaps we shall never see one another again."

"Why?"

"Because tomorrow the bailiffs are coming to turn me out of here. I am ruined. I haven't paid the rent, because the harvest failed, and the Prince's steward has served me with an eviction notice."

Pistillo's brow furrowed. His temples throbbed. The veins in his forehead bulged. His eyes became bloodshot. His lips quivered. Yet he uttered not a word. Finally, he murmured,almost as if speaking to himself:

"They evict a man and his family because he cannot pay a few thousand lire; they cast him out onto the street; they snatch the very bread from his mouth and from the mouths of his children!... It is an outrage. And yet they call *me* a brigand!"

Paolone listened, breathing not a word. The fury that exuded from every pore of Pistillo moved him deeply.

"Is there no way to set things right?"

"Only one, said the administrator, to whom I went yesterday to beg for mercy."

"What is it?"

"To pay. Do you understand? To pay six thousand scudi, when I haven't a hundred in my coffers; when there are no provisions for the coming year; when every sacrifice has been made just to scrape by, stripping ourselves of every last luxury."

"To pay, eh?" said the steward.

"Pay, or get out."

"Very well, you shall pay."

"Are you joking?"

"Giuseppe Pistillo never jokes when the life of a family is at stake. You shall pay."

"And who will give me the money?"

"I will give it to you."

"But who knows when I might be able to repay you? It will take at least ten good years to save up such a sum."

"Do not trouble yourself with that. I shall find a way to compensate myself."

"My life belongs to you."

"No, it belongs to your family. When do you need the six thousand scudi?"

"The administrator told me he would come tomorrow after lunch with the bailiffs."

"Very well: let's go to sleep."

At the break of dawn, Giuseppe Pistillo left the farm. Paolone's poor family spent the day in unspeakable anguish. The farmer had retreated into an impenetrable silence. Only every now and then would he ask what time it was. At the stroke of noon, the arrival of a horseman was announced; he was asking for the master. Paolone rushed out to meet him, beaming with hope and joy. Pistillo had kept his word. The horseman handed the farmer a large bundle, saying:

"From the one you know."

Then, turning his horse, he vanished. Paolone went up to his room with the bundle, and, having locked himself inside, he opened it. Inside were three thousand gold sequins[xviii]. The poor farmer fell to his knees and, weeping like a child, gave thanks to Divine Providence. He was still in that posture when a knock came at the door. The tenant farmer opened it and found himself face to face with his wife, who, in tears, announced the arrival of the estate manager, a bailiff, and two witnesses.

"We are lost! We are lost!" the wretched woman cried out. "My poor children!"

"We are saved," said Paolone, showing her the gold; as he plunged his hands into the coins, he found a handwritten note that read:

"Stall the manager and his party for as long as you possibly can."

Paolone locked the sequins away in his strongbox and went downstairs with his wife to meet the newcomers.

"Well?" asked the manager with a casual, slightly mocking air, giving a wink. "How goes it?"

"As God wills," replied the tenant farmer. "But you gentlemen must be no better off than I am, after such a long journey."

"We have our carriage in your coach-house, and the horses in your stable."

"I shall give the necessary orders to ensure they are well looked after. As for yourselves, I hope you will do us the honor of dining with us."

"Provided you don't let us starve to death," the administrator replied with a sneer.

"We haven't come to that yet."

The housekeeper flew into the kitchen, and before long, several chickens passed from the coop into the pots and pans to flesh out the meal. Meanwhile, the table was laid, and the guests were served. The meal was bountiful, exquisite, and washed down with excellent wine. The administrator and his men did it full justice, eating and drinking without restraint.

"It’s a pity one can’t dine at your place every day!" the administrator exclaimed, still maintaining his mocking tone. "But that explains the difficulties…"

"Difficulties," Paolone interrupted with an almost haughty air, "can arise for anyone. A man's true skill lies in knowing how to overcome them."

"You speak like a printed book. And I suppose you consider yourself one of those men?"

"That depends on the circumstances. What is it you require right now, for instance?"

"Oh! A trifle—a mere pittance, a bagatelle, hardly worth the trouble of mentioning: six thousand scudi. A nice, round sum."

"That is precisely the sum I have prepared for you."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"I say that the six thousand scudi are at your disposal."

"And where do you intend to get them?"

"From my strongbox—with your permission, of course."

"Fair enough. Perfectly proper. Flawless! I have no complaints."

"In that case, if you will permit me, I shall have another bottle brought in."

"By all means, my dear Paolone, be my guest!" "I’ve always said it:he’ll pay, he’ll pay! What the devil! He’s always been punctual. He couldn’t fail us. Eh! You know how it is: the estate yields a handsome profit. You just didn’t want to dip into your old savings. I sympathize with you. Had I been in your shoes, I might have done the very same... But in my position, I had to do my duty. To your health, Paolone!"

Thus the administrator concluded his speech. The tenant farmer went to fetch the gold coins, and, handing them to the administrator along with a sheet of paper, a pen, and an inkwell, he said:

"Would you kindly issue me a receipt for full settlement, countersigned by these gentlemen, for the sake of proper procedure?"

"Most willingly."

The money was verified, and the receipt was drawn up and signed. But before letting them depart, Paolone brought out more bottles, which the administrator and his companions received with the utmost enthusiasm.

By the time they finally decided to leave, dusk was beginning to fall. The sack of gold coins was stowed in the compartment beneath the rear seat of the carriage, into which the administrator, the bailiff, and one of the witnesses then climbed; the other witness took the reins to drive the horse. Before long, those inside were sleeping soundly, the makeshift coachman was dozing off, and the animal took full advantage of the situation to let its trot grow slower and more rambling with every step. They were roused with a start by Pistillo, who—accompanied by four friends—was lying in wait for them at a narrow pass; the bandits immediately set upon them, overpowering them and rendering them helpless. The administrator attempted to save the gold coins by offering up everything else he had on his person. But the attackers were far too well-informed; and since, after all, the money wasn't actually theirs, the victims submitted to being robbed without putting up too much of a fuss.

Thus the generous brigand recovered his three thousand zecchini, and the very next day he sent Paolone a receipt in full settlement. Yet, despite his good deeds, Giuseppe Pistillo was destined to meet a bad end to his career. Hard pressed by the authorities, he took refuge with three companions in a farmhouse. When attacked, they put up a resistance, and two of them fell dead; Pistillo and Giuseppe Agnone, after a fierce struggle, were arrested, taken to Terracina, tried, convicted, and executed, as I have previously noted, on August 13th. They would have nothing to do with religious solace and died like two ancient Stoics, arousing the admiration of the immense crowd that thronged the square to witness the execution—a multitude drawn from all the surrounding villages, summoned there by Pistillo’s great notoriety.

Chapter XXV

Tommaso Grassi, a livestock broker, had as a brother-in-law a butcher from Trastevere who was quite wealthy. The butcher had married Tommaso’s sister, one of the most charming young women in that district, purely for love; and although she hadn't a penny to her name, he treated her like a princess. Yet, far from pleasing her brother, this only irritated him, for he possessed a perverse and envious nature. Perhaps he had hoped the butcher would take him into his employ, make him a partner in his business, and share the profits with him. But that was not how the other man saw things.

While he did facilitate his brother-in-law’s work as a broker—and compensated him handsomely for his services—the shrewd butcher kept him at a safe distance, thereby provoking his fits of pique. One day, Tommaso Grassi went to his sister’s shop; finding her alone, he managed—partly through persuasion, partly through threats—to extort two hundred scudi from her. Upon learning of this, her husband confronted Grassi and said to him sternly:

"Listen, Maso: whenever you are in need of money, come to me, not to your sister. I do not care for women meddling in such matters. Consider those two hundred scudi a gift. Just try not to ask me for any more for quite some time, if you can help it."

"I couldn't care less about those two hundred scudi," Grassi replied arrogantly.

"Then why did you ask to borrow them?"

"I didn't ask *you* for them. I fully assumed my sister would be free to do as she pleased with such a paltry sum."

"A paltry sum that came in handy for you, nonetheless."

"Now that I know the money is yours, the moment I collect my own earnings, I’ll throw it right back in your face."

"Maso, mind your tongue; I am not in the habit of tolerating either bullying or insolence." The butcher’s tone of voice brooked no reply, and certainly no further provocation. Tommaso Grassi turned his back on him and went on his way, nursing a desire for revenge deep in his heart. About a month went by. The butcher had not seen his brother-in-law again, nor had his wife seen her brother, when, just as noon was striking on April 2nd, Tommaso Grassi walked into the shop as if nothing at all had happened.

"Well, look who’s here!" exclaimed the butcher, a good-natured fellow who had long since forgotten their quarrel. "You’ve arrived at just the right moment, Maso, to grab a bite to eat with us."

"No, thanks; I’ve come on business," Grassi replied.

"We can talk business over lunch."

"I’m not hungry."

"Suit yourself, then."

"There are some heifers for sale at a farmhouse just outside Porta Cavalleggeri that ought to be right up your alley."

"We can go take a look at them tomorrow."

"Why not today? It’s a young man—he’s just lost his father and needs to raise some cash. If we waste any time, someone else will beat us to the punch."

"Well, let's go tonight. Did you see the beasts yourself?"

"Yes."

"What are they like?"

"Beautiful. Stock from the Perugia region."

"Then all that remains is to seal the deal."

"If you trust me…"

"And why shouldn't I trust you? Have you suddenly become a stranger?"

"Then it’s settled. Around six o'clock, I’ll come back here with the friend who proposed the deal to me."

"We’ll hop in the cart and head out, then come back for dinner. You’ll have worked up an appetite by tonight, I imagine?"

"Let's hope so."

With that agreed upon, Tommaso Grassi took his leave. His sister, seeing that her brother hadn't even raised to his lips, out of politeness, the glass of wine her husband had offered him, felt troubled; she was seized by a vague, ominous premonition and said to him:

"Don't go."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. There are always dangers out at night."

"There are three of us; there’s nothing to fear."

The beautiful woman from Trastevere fell silent, but that evening, when she saw her husband climb into the cart with her brother and his companion, she felt a sudden pang in her heart. Such was the testimony she later gave in court. Tommaso Grassi and his friend occupied the two ends of the seat, while the butcher sat in the middle, driving and chatting cheerfully. But suddenly, his voice died in his throat: two knife thrusts—one in his side, penetrating deep into his torso, and another terrible blow to his neck that severed his carotid artery—had struck him down. He did not have time to utter a single word.

The two murderers carefully arranged his body on the floor of the cart and tied the horse's reins around his right arm; then, turning the cart back toward the city, they drove the horse into a desperate gallop with two sharp cracks of the whip. The small cart was not halted until it reached Porta Cavalleggeri, where the crime was finally discovered. Tommaso Grassi and his accomplice had seized the money the butcher had brought with him to pay for cattle, and they hoped to make their escape across the border. However, the swift report filed by the victim’s wife thwarted their plans; they were arrested within Rome itself, having re-entered the city through a different gate.

Once the trial commenced, Tommaso Grassi cynically confessed to the crime, claiming he had committed it out of vengeance. His accomplice adamantly denied any involvement, a claim supported even by the principal defendant. He testified that Grassi had stabbed the butcher suddenly and without warning, leaving him no opportunity to intervene or defend the victim; in this way, he managed to save his own skin, for while Grassi was sentenced to hang, the accomplice was merely condemned to stand beneath the gallows during the execution. The sentence was carried out on the morning of April 15, 1807, in the Piazza di Ponte Sant’Angelo, before a massive crowd; the atrocity of the crime and the notoriety of the individuals involved had left a profound impression upon the city. Tommaso Grassi attended to the salvation of his soul by making his confession, and in his final moments, he appeared truly repentant. He was transported to the scaffold in a cart alongside his accomplice, surrounded by a throng of spiritual comforters.

Upon reaching the platform, his companion disembarked first and was secured with irons to the stool from which he was to witness Grassi’s hanging. Grassi himself ascended the ladder somewhat unsteadily, supported by those around him; yet, before being cast into eternity—with the noose already tightening around his neck—he bade farewell to his accomplice. The latter remained utterly impassive, as if he were witnessing not a hanging, but merely the performance of some tightrope walker. He was, indeed, a man of unshakeable nerve.

Chapter XXVI

On May 2, 1807, at Campo Vaccino, I had occasion to hang and quarter Cesare di Giulio and Bernardino Troiani, two highwaymen from the environs of Rome who had given the constabulary a great deal of trouble. Yet their deeds scarcely merit mention, for they never rose above the most ignoble vulgarity. Regrettably, even crime possesses an aristocracy of its own. Within it—as in all things—are revealed the highest elevation of intellect and courage, the noblest character of the offender, and the most intense strength of spirit. These two malefactors who, after slaughtering poor travelers and displaying extraordinary ferocity toward the wretched, now trembled like leaves in the face of death, appealed to the universal pity of the crowd and wept like children, or like women; they aroused a sense of revulsion in the throng that had gathered to witness the execution: a crowd that, however, was not particularly dense. No sooner were they cut down from the gallows than the spectators began to disperse. It seemed the public was unwilling to grant them the honor of watching them be hacked to pieces.

Their quarters remained hanging from the scaffold until nightfall, as the Confraternity of San Giovanni was tardy in arriving to retrieve them for burial. And when they finally did arrive, it was discovered that two of the quarters had vanished; a rumor spread throughout Rome that they had been stolen to be sold. It seems an impossibility. Yet, despite every inquiry made, it was never discovered who had carried them away.

Far more interesting, however, proved to be another double execution I carried out on July 6 in Gubbio, involving Giuseppe Brunelli and Agostino Paoletti. The former had been living for several years with Margherita Cruciani, a woman of striking beauty who had already taken several lovers before giving herself to Brunelli. Tall and stout of stature, voluptuous in form, with a rosy complexion, beautiful dark eyes, thick eyebrows, and a luxuriant head of hair of the same hue, she was bound to appeal—and indeed did appeal—to many men.

Brunelli became utterly infatuated with her; through sheer persistence—with all he said and did—he finally persuaded her to take up with him. Yet his means were meager indeed: he worked as a livestock broker, a profession that, in those days, was not particularly lucrative. In short, in an effort to maintain her in a state of comfort that far exceeded his financial capacity, he drained his entire savings and found himself forced to subsist solely on the earnings from his brokerage deals. Poor Brunelli

subjected himself to every manner of deprivation. Yet, despite it all, he could no longer afford to keep Margherita in the style to which she had become accustomed; he foresaw that, sooner or later, she would inevitably abandon him. To live without her would be utterly impossible for him. He loved her too deeply, and his affection was reciprocated with sufficient intensity, for he was a man of robust vitality and physical vigor. One fine day—or rather, one sorrowful day—Margherita and Giuseppe found themselves without food; literally, without a morsel to eat. After long deliberation, withdrawn deep within himself, Brunelli heaved a heavy sigh; approaching his woman, he spoke these words:

"Listen, Margherita: I no longer have the heart to make you suffer like this. You are still young and beautiful; you will have no trouble finding other lovers—and quickly, too—who will amply provide for all your needs."

"So, you want to leave me?" the woman replied, appearing somewhat vexed.

"It is necessary."

"And yet you told me—over and over again, a thousand times—that you could not possibly go on living your life without me."

"And it is true—strictly, absolutely true—now just as it was then."

"I no longer understand you. What is it you intend to do?"

"Something very simple: I cannot live without you, yet I cannot live with you. Life, then, is utterly impossible for me in every way, and I have decided to kill myself."

Margherita—who knew her man's character all too well and knew that he was not the sort to indulge in idle talk—threw her arms around his neck in terror; drawing his head against her bosom, she kissed him passionately on the lips, saying:

"And do you truly believe that I would remain in this world without you?"

"Margherita, it is necessary; I do not want to—I cannot—bear to see you suffer. You see, destitution has overtaken us precisely because my worries prevent me from devoting myself to business with greater diligence."

"Very well, is that what you want? Let us die together."

"Not a chance."

"Do you think me incapable? Rather than lose you, I would do anything."

"Anything?"

"Yes, anything," the woman replied meaningfully. "Just as I am prepared to cast away my life for you, and with you, I would be prepared to…"

"Go on," Brunelli urged her, trembling with feverish agitation. "Go on."

"I cannot—not while you look at me with those fiery eyes; you frighten me."

And she returned to entwine him with her beautiful, rounded arms—from which he had just broken free—clutching him with even greater force, and intoxicating him with kisses and caresses. In the delirium of passion, Beppe lost all sense of his own dignity; having partly guessed what Margherita intended to propose, he murmured to her in a faint voice, as if he did not wish his own ears to hear the words his lips were uttering:

"Go on, Margherita; I am listening. Now, you may say anything."

"You can always reject my offer," the woman resumed, emboldened, "and you will always find me ready to follow your example, by killing myself."

"Speak."

"What if someone else were to take charge of our expenses?" Margherita whispered—or rather, breathed out—more than she actually spoke. Beppe felt a rush of blood surge to his head; a fit of jealousy seized him, and he thundered:

"Do you have another lover, then?"

"No! I swear it to you," the woman retorted instantly. "I have no other lover, nor will I ever have one; for I shall always belong to you: to you alone. Do you understand?"

"Yes and no. Explain yourself."

"I have no lover, and I never will. But—if you so desired—I could take a *protector*: a wealthy man who would help us."

"In exchange for possessing you?"

"By granting him what I *can* grant him—my body. Nothing else."

Giuseppe Brunelli ran his hand across his forehead, which was dripping with sweat. The blood hammered against his temples. A voice whispered to him: "Kill this viper who poisons you, who drags you down into infamy." It was the voice of conscience: the voice of duty. Yet another voice spoke to him: "Consent. After all, she is not your wife; your honor will not suffer for it. You can always cast her aside later, should she ever come to fill you with disgust." And it was the voice of brutal passion. Margherita, with that profound insight unique to a woman in love, grasped instantly the struggle being waged within Beppe’s soul. And, embracing him once more with utter abandon, she murmured:

"If you do not wish it, let us die. Let us die at once."

Then, correcting herself:

"Not at once. Let us savor one more night of love, first."

Brunelli's reason wavered amidst those embraces. His conscience lost ground with every passing moment, while erotic frenzy gained it. To lose a woman who loved him so? To renounce those ineffable ecstasies? To face the unknown? Why? For the sake of a mere prejudice. What did it matter to him if another man found pleasure in her, when he was certain that she would not share in that pleasure herself?

"If I were to consent," he murmured, "would you despise me?"

"I would adore you—if such a thing were possible—even more than I do now; for the sacrifice you would make would serve as proof of your affection for me."

"And this man?"

"He exists."

"Have you already given yourself to him?"

"Never."

"Has he made advances toward you?"

"A thousand times."

"And you rejected them?"

"Always."

"Swear it: by the memory of your mother, of your father, by all that you hold most sacred."

"I swear it."

"And who is he?"

"Agostino Paoletti."

"The butcher?"

"Him, precisely."

"An older man."

"Does that trouble you?" Margherita asked playfully, kissing Beppe once more upon the lips with one of those kisses capable of making even a man of the coldest temperament reel with vertigo.

"Let it be as you wish."

"Thank you."

"So, you desired this?"

"For your sake."

"Am I to remain entirely in the dark?"

"On the contrary; he wants your full consent, your formal agreement."

"So, is it a bargain he wishes to strike?"

"No: he simply wants to be sure of his ground; he is afraid."

"I believe it. Had I caught you in the act, it would have meant death for all of you."

The conversation was followed by a night that, for Margherita and Beppe, became an orgy of love.

Chapter XXVII

Agostino Paoletti was a man in his fifties, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, and large-headed, endowed with a formidable nose and a wide mouth, whose thick lips gave clear indication of a highly pronounced sensuality. A thoroughly jovial fellow: a lover of good drink and hearty fare, no less than of women and their charms, he settled in with Giuseppe Brunelli and Margherita, without the people of Gubbio taking too much offense. He had no family of his own; it was therefore only natural that, having reached the downward slope of life, he should seek out a surrogate family in which he could settle comfortably and find those cares and attentions indispensable to older men who have spent their lives in bachelorhood.

In Brunelli's house, he occupied a fine, well-furnished room featuring a spacious bed—arrangements that allowed him to enjoy every comfort without infringing upon his host's privacy. They ate together, went out together, and enjoyed themselves together. In short, within the intimacy of those domestic walls, theirs was a veritable three-way marriage—a relationship regarding which, at least outwardly, there was absolutely nothing to criticize. To be sure, there were undoubtedly wagging tongues—especially among those who recalled Margherita's past—that gave rise to malicious speculation. But who paid them any mind?

With the backing of his *compadre*—for that was how Beppe and Margherita habitually referred to the butcher—Brunelli's business began to prosper. From a mere broker, he had risen to the rank of livestock merchant. He now owned his own stable and frequently traveled away to make purchases in neighboring towns, sometimes remaining away for several days at a time. And thus, as his wealth grew, so too did his respectability. Moreover, Paoletti's own conduct could not have been more circumspect. Never did a word, a gesture, or a glance escape him that might have offended the sensibilities of the *de facto* husband.

Yet, this newfound well-being, this life of ease, weighed heavily upon Brunelli, sapping him of the very ardor that had won him Margherita's love. She, in turn, resented this change and began to feel a growing sense of repulsion toward her Beppe. At first, she gave voice to her feelings; however, the reception her outbursts met—from both of the men to whom she had so lavishly given herself—soon convinced her that this was not a path she should pursue. "What's done is done," Mosca Lamberti used to say, and he was right. It did not take Margherita long to accept this reality.

And so, she resolved to seek elsewhere those intoxicating thrills she could no longer find in Brunelli's arms—and which she had never found in Paoletti's. One night, returning from one of his usual late-night outings, Beppe found the butcher waiting for him at the front door.

"I was waiting for you," Agostino said. "I need to speak with you."

"Come on up, then, *compare*; we can chat for as long as you like."

"No—not upstairs. These are matters we must settle between the two of us; women have no place in them." The butcher's suggestion struck Beppe as odd, all the more so because he had detected a tremor of emotion in his voice, which Agostino was attempting—in vain—to conceal. Nevertheless, Beppe gave no sign that he had noticed, replying calmly:

"I'll come by the shop tomorrow morning, if that suits you, *compare*."

"Come at noon. We'll go out into the countryside to grab a bite to eat. Just tell Margherita that we have some business to attend to out of town."

"As you wish."

They shook hands and went upstairs together, betraying not the slightest hint of anxiety. The following day, at the appointed hour, Beppe made his way to Agostino's shop. The butcher had already left the door ajar and was waiting for him. When he saw Beppe appear, he shut the shop tight and said:

"Let's go, Beppe." They crossed the city in silence, and upon reaching a suburban tavern, the butcher went inside, ordered a meal in an upstairs room, and led his friend up to it. They ate, speaking only of trivial matters and with evident awkwardness on both sides. Beppe, no matter how much he racked his brains, could not fathom the reason for this meeting, nor the subject of the conversation his friend was supposed to broach but failed to bring up. Paoletti, for his part, did not know how to broach the distasteful and thorny topic. When they had finished eating, Brunelli, realizing that his friend's hesitation must stem from fear, decided to encourage him by taking the initiative himself; he spoke up and said:

"Let's drink to your health!"

"Thank you! And to yours."

"Thank you—likewise. But if we have no one else to toast, perhaps we should get on with it. Margherita must be getting anxious... perhaps."

"You were right to say 'perhaps.'"

"Don't you think she might be, my friend?"

The blow had been struck; there was no turning back now. Agostino Paoletti understood this and replied:

"I believe she may well have someone to comfort her when she is alone."

Beppe sprang to his feet, slammed his fists onto the table, and—calm even amidst the fury boiling in his chest—said slowly:

"My friend, you are saying something very grave. Did it perhaps slip out without you thinking?"

"I am not in the habit of uttering words without foundation."

"Do you, then, firmly believe that she is deceiving us?" he asked Agostino in a somber voice.

It was the first time he had alluded to that shared enjoyment of the woman which they had established between them. But Paoletti did not take the bait; he replied, not without emphasizing that particular pronoun:

"I have absolute certainty, alas, that Margherita is betraying *you*."

That pronoun, so heavily underscored by his companion's voice, felt like a dagger thrust into Beppe's heart. He perceived it as a personal insult, for by it, Paoletti clearly demonstrated that he desired no share in the shame. Yet he dissembled, thrusting deep into the recesses of his soul the bitterness it had stirred within him. And, falling in with his companion's evident intent to sever the moral bond that tied them together, he resumed:

"I thank you for having put me on my guard."

"It was my strict duty as a friend."

"A duty rarely fulfilled."

"Not everyone who claims to be a friend truly is: not as I am to you: for life and for death."

"What do you advise me to do?"

"First, catch her in the act."

"And then?"

"If you need a hand to help you, here is mine," he said, flashing a look of pure hatred from his eyes as he brandished a knife.

"It shall be done!" replied Beppe Brunelli, extending his right hand to Paoletti, who gripped it firmly.

"Bravo. That is how men speak, and how men act."

"And so, here lies a shattered life, a destroyed happiness, a friendship…"

"Cemented—made indissoluble, Beppe. Remember, Beppe, the words I spoke just moments ago, and which I now repeat to you: for life and for death."

"For life and for death," the broker echoed, gripping tightly the hand that the butcher had offered him for the second time.

"But it is time I told you how the discovery came about," Paoletti resumed. "That is precisely why I brought you here."

"Speak. I am listening."

"One night, while you were out—returning late to my room—I heard a noise coming from yours."

"I assumed you had returned unexpectedly, so I approached to open it; but it was locked. Hearing whispering from within, I became increasingly convinced that Margherita was with you—she certainly wasn't alone. I knocked, and knocked again, but received no answer."

"The wretched hussy!" Beppe exclaimed.

"Then an idea struck me—vague at first, a suspicion almost imperceptible—but one that gradually began to take shape and substance. I was still fully dressed; I crept back downstairs slowly so as not to be heard. Upon reaching the front door, which I had found open when I entered, and had left open behind me, I closed it tight, then went to take up a position in the doorway of the house directly opposite. From there, I could see out without being seen myself, shielded as I was by the dense shadows. A few minutes later, I saw a light through the semicircular transom window above the door; yet the door itself did not open."

"The swine must have expected to find it still open, and had to go back upstairs to get the key. It’s obvious."

"Indeed: a few moments later, I saw the light again through the transom. The door creaked open, and a young lout stepped out. But standing behind him was a white silhouette."

"The slut."

"Margherita, disheveled and half-undressed who, before letting him leave, threw her bare arms around his neck, pulled him close, and kissed him once more."

"Why wasn't I in your shoes? I would have killed them both like dogs."

"Why *both*? Him—him alone—is the one who had to die... who *must* die."

"And her? The whore?" asked Brunelli, in whom his crony’s tale had rekindled the furious fires of jealousy.

"She will be punished enough by the death of her paramour. And it will serve as a lesson for the future."

These words from Paoletti came as a cold shower to the broker. The fever that had seized him for a moment vanished. Only then did he read clearly in the butcher's mind the man's true intentions. He wanted the lover killed—the man who disturbed his domestic privacy—but the woman spared, for he neither could nor would renounce her embraces. For him—for Beppe—vengeance was not complete. It sufficed as far as his material interests were concerned, but it did not appease his jealousy; it did not adequately wash away the affront he had suffered. Margherita had sworn to him that her entire affection would be bestowed upon him alone. She could give her body to others without ceasing to be exclusively his. Instead, another man had supplanted him. He was now nothing more than a second crony, sharing—in perfect halves with the first—the mercenary pleasures of that woman.

Killing the lover would have caused her pain, but a pain far too faint compared to his own. And besides, she would have soon consoled herself with another man. Was he to start all over again? Even if he were able to kill with impunity every single paramour Margherita might take, one after another, he would find no satisfaction; for in that very moment, the passion she had once inspired in him surged back to life, impetuous and overwhelming. Yet, despite this battle raging within his soul, Beppe remained outwardly impassive. His decision was made: he would kill the lover, and then exact upon the woman a vengeance: slow, drawn-out, inexorable, and unquenchable, just like his own pain. Paoletti attributed Brunelli's brief silence to the calculations he assumed he was making regarding the planned killing of Margherita's lover; he therefore hastened to share further details of his discovery, hoping they might serve as a guide.

"I gave Margherita time," the butcher resumed, "to go back upstairs and get back into bed; then I went to bed myself. The next morning I saw her again, but neither did she speak to me of the night, nor did I make any allusion to it. For two or three nights, I kept a close watch, but the lover did not return."

"They must have arranged to meet elsewhere."

"That is precisely what I thought. I remained on alert, and soon noticed that Margherita was leaving the house at the crack of dawn and staying out for half the day. The other morning, I took up a hidden post; when I saw her leave, I followed her from a distance, unseen. At the door, she met her lover; I continued to follow them, and they came here."

"Here?" asked Beppe, dumbfounded with surprise.

"Here. I let them enter, and then I went in myself. I made inquiries with the innkeeper—an acquaintance of mine—and learned that the two lovebirds come here every morning to bill and coo for two or three hours." I asked my friend to give me a nearby room, one from which I could see without being seen, and hear if the need arose, and I was granted it. Just take a look through that door."

The broker rose and went to peer through the cracks of the door directly opposite the table where they sat. The bed was visible, still unmade.

"So, they came again this morning?" he shouted, seized once more by one of his fits of jealousy.

"And they'll come again tomorrow," his companion replied, emphasizing the words with deliberate intent.

"We'll spare the innkeeper the trouble of making the bed."

Paoletti laughed heartily at this quip—which was in rather poor taste—then said:

"We'll have to pretend to go away."

"No, that would be a mistake. Certain that she could get away with it scot-free, she'd be capable of bringing her paramour right home. I'll leave alone; you carry on as usual."

"We'll meet outside the city gate at dawn."

"So be it."

The butcher and the broker went downstairs, settled their bill with the innkeeper, and returned to the city calm and satisfied, as if they had just arranged a pleasure outing.

Chapter XXVIII

It was a crisp spring morning: the rising sun cast a soft, almost rosy light upon the verdure of the countryside; little birds warbled from the trees—from branches still glistening with dew—offering their greeting to the dawning day. A gentle mountain breeze stirred the tiny blossoms on their slender stems and saturated the air with woodland scents. There was a loving peace in nature that was truly enchanting—enough to make a poet even of me, Giovanni Bugatti, known as Mastro Titta, whose only acquaintance with verse is the death-rattle of my hanged men and the querulous wailing of the terrified souls I send to their doom. Margherita and her lover, having risen at the break of dawn, had met at their usual trysting place and were making their way toward the city gate, chatting cheerfully as they went:

"So, your husband...?"

"He left yesterday to buy some cattle and will be away for a good week."

"And the old man?"

"The old man is sulking. Ever since that night he came knocking—and I refused to open the door—he hasn't bothered me again."

"Could he have grown suspicious?"

"Not a chance. Besides, what does he expect? I tolerate him as it is, and that’s more than enough. Don't you agree?"

"Agree? I should say so! As for me, I wish he’d drop dead right where he stands."

"In his bed, the poor wretch."

"All the better; that way he wouldn't have to suffer."

"And who would be left to foot the bill?"

"That butcher must have money."

"He certainly does. But what is his is not mine."

"It ought to be, though."

"If only."

"What would you do?"

"First of all, I’d tell Beppe to go get himself killed."

"And what if he refused to go?"

"Would you take care of it yourself?"

This question, hurled so abruptly and point-blank by the voluptuous woman, sent a shiver running down the young man's spine. But at that very moment, they had reached the gate, and it was only natural that the lover made no reply. They walked on in silence for several minutes, until they reached the open countryside. The road was deserted. Only down on the hillsides could a few peasants be seen, intent on their farm work.

"And then?" the young man finally asked, his blood beginning to course hotly through his veins once more.

"Then? I would be yours—wholly yours, exclusively yours."

Intoxicated by these words, the young man encircled Margherita's waist with his left arm; then, slipping his right arm around her neck, he gently drew her close and kissed her with fervor. The woman returned his kiss and embrace with equal ardor. And so they continued for a good stretch of the road: frolicking, gathering flowers, embracing, exchanging vows of love, and chasing one another like young lovers.

"Oh, if only we could spend our entire lives like this!" the woman exclaimed in a moment of rapture, as her lover, having suddenly swept her into his arms from behind, pressed against her swelling bosom and kissed her on the lips, her head thrown back in abandon.

"Always like this? That depends on you."

"On me? And how is that?" Margherita asked, stopping abruptly.

"Start by getting rid of the old man."

"You would want that?"

"Why not? I know a witch who brews love potions."

"Well?"

"By slipping him a generous dose every day…"

"That would bore me even more than usual," the woman interrupted, shrugging her shoulders as if her lover's words had left her feeling disappointed.

The young man, too, had come to a halt. At that point, the road took a sharp bend, and the shrub-covered hillside formed a sort of natural alcove: open in the front, enclosed at the back, with a natural bench running through the middle.

"Come here, sit beside me, and listen," the lover resumed, going to sit on the bench and drawing Margherita down with him by the hand.

"Go on, then. Though what you're planning strikes me as sheer madness."

"It is the surest way to get an aging man out of the way without any future complications. The love potion takes effect, and you simply fuel it with all the ardor you can muster. In the delirium of passion, between one amorous transport and the next, you get whatever you desire from him; and within a few short days, the old man, utterly spent, will simply fade away."

"And what is it you want?"

"I want to have you—mine, all mine, exclusively mine—just as you said a moment ago," the young man murmured, encircling her once more with his arms and sealing her lips with his own.

But just then, a rustling of leaves was heard from behind the alcove, and the two lovers sprang to their feet in alarm.

"What was that?" Margherita asked, terrified; and the young man, seeking to calm her, promptly replied:

"Nothing. Just a hare, or some other wild creature…"

He did not finish the sentence, for two men who had suddenly emerged from behind the thicket threw themselves upon him and knocked him to the ground before he could recover from his surprise and put himself on the defensive. The more ferocious of the two was the older man. He scarcely retained a human appearance, so utterly had the hatred swelling in his chest transfigured him. Kneeling atop the young man, he held him fast by the neck with his left hand while, with his right, he rained down stab after stab. The other assailant, though equally eager to strike, held his knife poised above the unfortunate victim, searching for the spot where best to inflict a wound. The woman, in despair, buried her hands in her hair, unable to decide whether to intervene to halt the carnage or simply to flee. She had recognized Beppe and the butcher; overwhelmed by terror, she seemed to be awaiting her own death in turn, fully conscious that she had earned it.

The two murderers did not linger long before rising to their feet. Having sated their lust for blood and quenched their thirst for vengeance, they realized they must now attend to their own safety. Beppe approached her, and—taking her by the hand as she shielded her eyes with both hands—he dragged her forward to stand before the corpse of her slain lover, and said to her:

"Mark this well! This is the end that awaits any lover you might dare to take. As for you, a far worse fate awaits you if you dare to breathe a single word of what you have seen."

Meanwhile, the butcher had hoisted the corpse onto his shoulders and said to Beppe:

"Let's go bury him."

"Begone!" Brunelli commanded Margherita. "And if anyone questions you, bite out your own tongue rather than speak! You would suffer less."

Margherita moved mechanically, as if obeying a will entirely distinct from her own. She appeared to be in a state of somnambulism. Pale as death, with vacant eyes ringed in black and livid lips drooping at the corners, she retraced the path she had walked but moments before: then intoxicated with love, cheerful, festive, and eager for pleasure and delight. Brunelli stirred the blood-soaked earth with his feet, erasing all traces; then he set off behind Paoletti, who had turned down a narrow cross-lane. They walked for a quarter of an hour; Beppe had asked the butcher:

"Do you want me to help you? That bundle must be heavy."

"There is no need," Paoletti had replied. "I would gladly carry it to the ends of the earth; it is a small service I am rendering him."

The lane led to a clearing where several lime pits were situated.

"Now, give me a hand," said the butcher.

Beppe stepped forward and grasped the corpse—which the other had laid upon the ground—by the feet; the butcher seized it by the shoulders, and after balancing it for a moment, they heaved it into the largest pit.

"Finished!" exclaimed Agostino Paoletti, heaving a sigh of satisfaction.

"And now?" asked Brunelli.

"Now, it is best that you go about your business and stay away for another week, just as you had planned. Here is some money, should you need it." He handed a purse to the broker, who calmly slipped it into his pocket after weighing it in his hand for a moment.

"As for me," the butcher continued, "I am returning to Gubbio. Do not trouble yourself with worry. Should there be any developments, I will let you know."

And so, the two accomplices parted ways. Upon returning home that evening, Paoletti found Margherita seated on a chair, silent and motionless. He approached her, yet she appeared not to recognize him. He shook her gently with his hand, but she gave no sign of noticing him. All his efforts to rouse her back to awareness proved futile. The butcher decided it best to retire to bed, hoping that during the night she would either snap out of it on her own or that a solution would occur to him. But the following morning, he found her still motionless, silent, and with her eyes wide open, remaining in the very same spot. It became necessary to summon a doctor, who declared her to be of unsound mind and had her transported to the hospital, as she could not be left abandoned to fend for herself. Two days

later, the corpse of the murdered man was discovered in the lime pit; despite the burns the body had sustained, the wounds inflicted by the knives of Paoletti and Brunelli were still discernible upon it, and public rumor immediately accused the latter of the crime.

The public prosecutor ordered his search and arrest, which was promptly carried out. Transported to Gubbio by the constables, he was immediately brought face-to-face with his mistress; upon seeing him, she was seized by a nervous breakdown, followed by a near-fatal fainting spell. The evidence was grave, though not conclusive, and Brunelli denied everything obstinately, claiming to know nothing about the matter. The investigations continued. The innkeeper to whose establishment Margherita used to go with her lover was located; skillfully interrogated, he eventually confessed that the butcher had visited him, requesting a room adjacent to the one occupied by the two lovers, and that he had even returned there later with the broker, dining together in that very same room.

When confronted with this man as well, Beppe Brunelli denied everything and dismissed the innkeeper as a madman. Meanwhile, Agostino Paoletti had also been arrested, as the investigations revealed that he was carrying on an illicit affair with Margherita, an affair of which Brunelli was evidently aware and to which he had consented. Thus, the preliminary inquiry succeeded in reconstructing the entire tragic drama. The butcher, too, was brought before the madwoman; the moment she saw him, she sat bolt upright in her bed—where she had been lying—and, fixing him with a searing glare that had in that instant regained all its former intensity, she screamed:

"Murderer! Murderer!"

She then collapsed backward onto the bed. Yet circumstantial evidence (however overwhelming) was not sufficient, nor could the assertion of a mentally deranged woman carry any legal weight. It became necessary to resort to a stratagem. Brunelli was led to believe that the other butcher had confessed everything. And since the investigation had already firmly established the facts, the ruse succeeded brilliantly. After much hesitation and stalling, Beppe finally made a full confession to the crime, detailing its every particular. And his confession was soon followed by that of Paoletti. It was a triumph for the judges who had presided over the trial. And the sentence—condemnation to the gallows for both men—was not long in coming. I carried it out, as I have recounted, on the morning of July 6th, before a vast crowd of onlookers who were struck with admiration by the demeanor of the two criminals; they requested and received the consolations of religion, dying like good Christians: without bravado, yet without cowardice. The echoes of the trial reverberated from one end of Italy to the other.

Chapter XXIX

On December 12, 1807, I brought my operations for that year to a close by hanging Giuseppe Romiti in Narni, a man upon whom fell the dubious honor of initiating the second hundred of my judicial executions within the Papal States.

The crime committed by Romiti was, by virtue of its specific details, one of the most ferocious, barbaric, and bizarre offenses I have ever been tasked with punishing by death during the long course of my existence. Giuseppe Romiti was a vineyard worker from the outskirts of Narni. Miserly, selfish, and cruel, he was as deeply hated as he was feared. He lived in isolation, like a wild beast without a single friend, never mingling in the company of other people. He subjected himself to every manner of deprivation solely to amass money. He had a wife, yet their marriage had not been blessed with children. Two of his sisters lived under his roof, but he had steadfastly refused to let them marry, simply to avoid having to pay out a single penny in dowry. He also had a younger brother who had taken as his wife an honest and industrious young woman; she had borne him two children—yet even for these little ones, Romiti never offered so much as a smile, despite the fact that they were the only souls in the household toward whom he showed any semblance of consideration, or whose rations he did not strictly curtail. He wished to raise them to be as sullen and joyless as he was himself, and he was fond of declaring that once they had grown a little older, he would take them away from their parents so that they would not grow up to be as feckless and useless as they were. Amidst such a multitude of vices, he possessed but a single redeeming sentiment: the desire to see his family line endure and prosper in wealth.

For some time, Giuseppe Romiti had noticed that petty thefts of produce were being committed on his small farm. Yet, no matter how vigilant he remained, he never succeeded in catching the thieves in the act.

"If I ever manage to catch them," he would repeat at every turn, "I swear I will hang them with my own two hands." On his small farm, he possessed an orchard cultivated with great care; he loved the magnificent trees there, to which he devoted his labors by day and his thoughts by night. Towering above the others stood a magnificent pear tree, laden with fruit—pears that the autumn sun was gilding with gold—and which constituted his greatest delight and pride. He had calculated that, by harvesting the fully ripened fruit, he would reap a sum of money that was by no means insignificant to him; and

the fine weather had caused him to linger over the task. One fine morning, having risen earlier than usual, he went out to inspect his little treasure, only to find it completely stripped bare. The thieves had left nothing on the tree but a few damaged, unripe pears. His rage soared to the pitch of a blinding fury. He did not utter a single word all day long. He asked no questions of anyone. His wrath endowed him with a kind of clairvoyance. A deep conviction had taken root in his soul: that he would catch the thieves, and that he would finally be able to exact vengeance for every theft he had ever suffered.

As evening fell, he feigned going to bed—and indeed threw himself onto it—but remained fully clothed. And when the profound silence reigning throughout the house signaled to him that everyone had gone to sleep, he crept softly down into the garden and went to conceal himself within a nursery of dwarf trees. He waited for long hours, without making a single movement. He waited with the absolute certainty in his heart that the thieves would come—and with them, the moment to unleash the bitter rancor festering within his soul.

The stars were just beginning to pale, and the sky's hue to lighten ever so slightly, when he heard a rustling of leaves coming from the direction of the hedge that separated the orchard from the road. He strained his ears and caught the sound of footsteps, faint though they were. The sound was drawing closer. He raised his head and saw a young lad a few paces away, a basket tucked under his arm, approaching a pear tree, less fine than the one already stripped bare, yet still promising. He did not move. He wanted the theft to be set in motion first. He did not have long to wait: the barefoot youth, having embraced the tree trunk, began to clamber up it. He had already grasped a thick branch and was just about to swing himself up onto it when Giuseppe Romiti sprang from his hiding place. Rising to his feet, seizing the wretched thief by the legs, yanking him to the ground, and pinning him down with his knees upon his chest: it was all a matter of mere seconds.

"Mercy, Master Beppe! Have mercy on me and on my poor mother!" the unfortunate wretch murmured in supplication.

Romiti did not hear—or at least, he did not answer; he paused for a moment in indecision, pondering what manner of death he should inflict upon him. A gruesome idea flashed through his mind: he stripped the boy naked, then, having bound his wrists and ankles, he scrambled nimbly up the tree like a squirrel. He passed the end of a rope through the fork of two stout branches, the tips of which he managed to force together using the mighty strength of his arms; then, untying the knot that bound the boy's legs, he tied each foot to the tip of one of the branches. When released, the branches sprang apart, and the body of the wretched victim was split open like that of a lamb, like a carcass hung from a

butcher’s hooks and cleaved in two. Having exacted his horrible vengeance, Giuseppe Romiti climbed down from the tree. At that very moment, his brother happened to be passing by on his way to work; Romiti called out to him and presented him with the sight of that ghastly spectacle.

A few hours later, he turned himself in to the Bargello of Narni. Upon his trial, he was sentenced to be hanged for "barbarous murder," and I carried out the execution. He died unrepentant, courageously, and satisfied with his deed.

Chapter XXX

After months of respite, on February 17, 1816, I was called upon to perform a double execution in the Piazza del Popolo; yet the criminals bore no relation to one another, nor were the crimes for which they were to suffer the ultimate penalty in any way connected. The first was Francesco Perelli, a Roman: a young laborer sentenced to the simple gallows for premeditated murder. He had been discovered by gendarmes on Via Florida, late at night, standing near the entrance of a palazzo where a murder had just been committed against a private citizen. He still clutched in his hand a razor-sharp stiletto with a short iron hilt, dripping with blood; his clothes, too, were soaked in it. He offered not the slightest resistance to his arrest. Brought before the bargello, he either could not or would not utter a word. He appeared utterly stupefied. Was it horror at the heinous deed he had committed? Was it fear of the penal consequences that awaited him? Was it a profound spiritual collapse brought on by the very passion that had armed his hand? No one could have asserted any of these possibilities with a clear conscience.

The victim was a handsome young man, elegantly dressed, and a member of a wealthy and noble family. The constables had found him lying face-down on the paving stones in a pool of blood that gurgled forth from a wound in his throat and another in his chest, directly over his heart. He could have been struck only moments before. They lifted him up and gently seated him on the sidewalk, propping his back against the wall; but he could not hold himself upright and showed no signs of life. They immediately knocked upon the heavy door before which he had fallen. The porter came running, opened the door, and, upon being informed of the tragedy, stepped outside with a lantern. He instantly recognized the deceased, exclaiming:

"Don Enrico!… Poor Don Enrico!"

Then he added:

"But then again, he was bound to end up this way. Those accursed women."

"So you know him, then?" asked the constables.

"Know him? I certainly do! He is the landlord's son."

"Do you think he was robbed?"

"Robbed? Nonsense! Can't you see he's wearing rings on his fingers and a gold chain on his waistcoat?"

Indeed, that was the case. They searched his pockets and found his purse, containing many sequins and scudi, as well as an ivory locket holding a miniature portrait of a beautiful young woman, lavishly mounted and adorned with diamonds. The deceased was carried into the concierge's lodge, with strict orders that he was not to be touched until the investigators had arrived. And the constables—a bit belatedly, perhaps, but in the nick of time nonetheless—rushed out of the palace to see if they could find any trace of the murderer. Sure enough, they encountered him on Via Florida, just a few steps from the scene of the crime; he was leaning against a wall, directly beneath a streetlamp, and they recognized him instantly by the bloodstains on his clothes and the dagger he held in his hands.

For several days, he remained in a state of absolute silence and in the same profound stupor into which he had fallen immediately after committing the crime. Neither coaxing nor threats had the slightest effect upon him. The judge was at his wits' end, unable to find any means to rouse him. Finally, on the fifth day, as soon as the prisoner was brought before him, the judge spoke:

"Francesco Perelli, you are neither a thief nor a common murderer. We have, for the most part, established the motive behind your crime. This portrait, which was discovered in the victim's pocket, served as our guiding thread throughout the investigation." As the judge spoke, the criminal seemed gradually to emerge from the state of semi-stupor in which he had been immersed for so many days; he listened attentively to his interlocutor, and both intelligence and hatred flashed in his eyes.

The judge handed him the portrait, saying: "Take a look, Perelli—do you recognize her?"

The accused snatched the portrait, cast a quick glance at it, and burst out with a cry:

"My sister!... The scoundrel!"

"Your sister, precisely," the judge replied, playing along. Then, venturing a guess, he continued:

"Was Don Enrico her lover?"

"Her seducer—call him her wicked seducer! The cause of her dishonor and my ruin."

"Calm yourself, and tell me the details of this seduction. Mind that you are sincere and honest; do not let yourself be blinded by hatred. The truth—the truth alone—can save you."

Francesco bowed his head, and two burning tears coursed down his cheeks.

"A man who weeps is a defeated man," the judge thought. "I shall soon know the truth—the whole truth."

And he resumed the interrogation.

Chapter XXXI

Virginia Perelli was a beautiful young woman from Trastevere upon whom the covetous eyes of every young man in the district had rested in vain, for she was as virtuous and honorable as she was beautiful. Orphaned of both father and mother, she lived with her brother, Francesco, in a small cottage on Via Vascellari. They occupied a ground-floor room that served as a kitchen, along with two small bedrooms upstairs, accessed via a narrow internal wooden staircase; Francesco slept in the first, and Virginia in the other.

Her brother worked partly as a carpenter and partly as a caulker at San Francesco a Ripa; and, skilled craftsman that he was, he earned a respectable living. His sister was an exceptionally talented restorer of antique lace and needlework; the most important and intricate pieces were sent to her by merchants from the Piazza di Spagna, and she was well compensated for her efforts. Thus, they lived in a state of modest comfort; Virginia's room was charmingly coquettish, while Francesco's was impeccably tidy. The young woman possessed a lovely coral necklace, gold earrings adorned with pearls—such as a bride might wear—and a host of other gold trinkets. She dressed with an elegant simplicity—befitting a working-class girl, of course, yet without ostentation—thereby revealing the exquisite refinement of her taste. On feast days, when she stepped out in her rose-colored gown, which accentuated her slender waist and highlighted the voluptuous curves of her bosom and hips; with a black shawl draped nonchalantly over her shoulders (which appeared broader due to the fullness of her bust), and wearing low-cut slippers with ribbons crisscrossing the insteps of her small, high-arched feet beneath a short skirt trimmed with a delicate ruffle, she inspired universal admiration. The other young women and mothers regarded her with envy, while the young men fell instantly in love. And so, the young men would gather at the Church of Santa Cecilia, where she was accustomed to attending Mass. Nor did they neglect to pass by the small front door of her house—where, on weekdays, she was accustomed to sitting and working, much like the other women and girls of the street, the better to enjoy the fresh air and light.

At dusk on a hot, sultry summer day, Virginia noticed a young man of bold and confident bearing who walked back and forth along Via dei Vascellari, gazing at her repeatedly and intently, with the clear intention of catching her eye. His tall, slender figure; his handsome, pale-olive oval face, upon which the jet-black of his soft, fine beard stood out in sharp relief; and, above all, his eyes—at times

languid, at times flashing with fire—did not seem unfamiliar to Virginia. It seemed to her that she had seen them elsewhere; yet the memories remained a confused blur in her mind. At that hour, the young woman was in the habit of walking out to meet her brother near San Francesco a Ripa; from there, they would proceed to one of the nearby taverns to have a bite of supper and enjoy the evening coolness. That evening, however, she hesitated. She feared that the presumptuous young man might follow her. But eventually, she made up her mind: she threw her small black shawl over her shoulders, stepped outside, and closed the door behind her. She glanced around for a moment; seeing no sign of the young man—as she had feared she might—she turned into the narrow Vicolo dei Salumi, quickening her pace. Yet no sooner had she reached Piazza Romana than she saw him approaching her from the front. She felt a sudden pang of apprehension—not, however, unmixed with a faint shadow of pleasure; a mere shadow.

"Forgive me, Virginia," the young man said to her with an easy, self-assured air, "for stopping you here in the street. But I have need to speak with you."

"I do not know you," the young woman murmured, blushing deeply.

"That is precisely the point: if I did not speak to you now, you would never come to know me."

"What is it you wish to say? Speak; I am listening. But make haste, for my brother is waiting for me."

"This setting does not strike me as particularly suitable. But since you wish it so, let it be. If you will permit me, I shall walk a short way with you."

"No, no; I always go alone."

"Nor do I intend to divert you from your habits. But grant me this favor, just this once. Later on, we shall make other arrangements."

"Later on?" asked Virginia, her voice trembling as she set off with the handsome young man walking by her side.

"Yes, later on. For our conversation today will be but the first of many."

"Explain yourself more clearly."

"Nothing could be simpler. I love you, Virginia, and you must be mine."

"But I do not wish to leave my brother all alone, he who raised me from childhood, after our father and mother passed away."

"There is no need to leave him, at least not for the moment. Besides, who is to say that he, too, might not make a sacrifice—condemning himself to a life of celibacy—simply so he need not leave you? He is a young man, after all; surely he, too, will find a love of his own."

This thought—one the young girl had never entertained before—shook her to the core. She immediately grasped the logic of it and thought: *Why shouldn't we both marry? After all, family is the ultimate purpose of life.* From that moment on, she no longer felt displeased by her encounter with the young man, and she lent a more willing ear to his words.

"If you wish, I will speak to your brother about it right away."

"No, not right away. Let me think it over first. You aren't in a hurry, I assume?" she asked, tilting her charming little head to the side and gazing at him with evident warmth.

"One is always in a hurry when it comes to winning the love of a beautiful young girl like you, Virginia."

"Who told you my name?"

"I've known it for a month."

"For a month?"

"From the very first day I saw you, I resolved to make you mine."

"Resolved? You are very presumptuous. And what about my consent?"

"I am here to ask for it. Or why ask at all? Haven't your eyes already told me that you, too, harbor a certain fondness for me?"

"My eyes either said nothing at all, or they told a lie."

"I don't believe that. They are incapable of it. You are not a coquette. You have never had lovers. And it is for me that your heart will flutter for the very first time."

"Oh my! Oh my! How you do run on! Who told you all these lovely things?"

"I simply know it; and let this serve as proof that, before surrendering myself to the passion you have inspired in me, I wanted to ensure that you were worthy of it."

"Let us part ways now. I wouldn't want you to run into my brother," murmured the young girl, who was beginning to feel her resolve waver and feared she might let slip a confession that was, in truth, quite unnecessary: for the young man had already understood perfectly well the affection that his presence and his words had stirred within Virginia's innocent heart.

"As you wish. When shall we meet again?"

"Whenever you wish..." the young woman stammered, blushing.

"Tomorrow."

"At the very same time and place. Farewell... What is your name?"

"Enrico."

"Enrico? A lovely name!"

"You like it? Well, then tell me: 'Goodbye, my Enrico,' and give me your hand."

"Mine? Is that truly so?"

"I swear it to you."

They exchanged a handshake and parted ways for the evening.

Chapter XXXII

The relationship between the two young people continued; Enrico was bold, enterprising, and well-versed in all the arts of seduction. The girl was naive, ardent, and deeply in love. Victory was not long denied to the clever young workman, who possessed such refined manners and used language so different from the others. Sometimes Virginia would say to him:

"You speak like a prince."

"And I wish I were one."

"Why?"

"To make you my princess."

In the transports and intoxicating rapture of passion, the girl forgot everything: her brother, her promise of marriage, her future. She lived almost in a state of perpetual amorous ecstasy. But the day came when she could no longer ignore the fact that she carried the fruit of that love within her. And then she felt a tightening in her heart, as if she already had a premonition of what was to come. Meanwhile, she put off confessing her condition to Enrico from one day to the next. She feared it would be a burden to him and drive him away from her. But one fine day, the young man noticed, and said to her:

"Virginia, you are pregnant."

The girl bowed her head to her bosom in shame, nodding yes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid of causing you distress."

"It certainly is a complication. But earlier on, we could have found a remedy."

"How?" Virginia asked, aghast.

Enrico realized he had gone too far and tried to repair the damage. But his mind was too agitated, and he stumbled from one blunder to another.

"You can't stay here," he told her. "Before long, everyone would find out, and you would become the talk of the neighborhood."

"My brother would kill me," the girl murmured.

"How do we get out of this?"

"Marry me!" exclaimed Virginia, suddenly summoning all the energy of her Trastevere roots, with one of those surges of spirit characteristic of strong personalities.

"Marry you? Very well," replied the young man, with little candor; he had been deeply shaken by the look with which the girl had transfixed him as she uttered that cry: "Marry me!" "Marry you? Certainly, I will—but not right now, not immediately."

"Would you, then, expose me to certain shame and probable death?"

"No, no! Not in your wildest dreams."

"Then what are we to do?"

"Listen, I own a small villa near Albano."

"You own a villa?" exclaimed Virginia, more distraught than ever by this revelation. "So you aren't a working man, like my brother, like me? So you've deceived me? So you seduced me merely for your own amusement? So you've made a fallen woman of me? So you don't love me—you never loved me at all!"

Warming to her subject as she spoke these words, Virginia had transformed into a wildcat. With that marvelous intuition unique to women when they find themselves suddenly thrust into grave danger, she had grasped the situation perfectly. For her, there was no longer any hope of salvation, nor any hope of love. But vengeance remained, and she intended to savor it. Swift as lightning, she tore a silver stiletto from her hair—the very pin she used to fasten her tresses atop her head—and lunged at the young man to strike him; but he was quick enough to dodge the blow.

Yet Virginia's fury did not subside. With the magnificent mantle of her black hair streaming down her body, her cheeks aflame, her eyes burning like embers, her chest heaving, and her arms outstretched—divinely beautiful and mesmerizing—she rushed at Enrico once more and managed to graze his neck with the tip of the stiletto. A small splash of warm blood misted her face; and then, desperate with anguish and intoxicated by passion, she began to kiss the slight wound with her lips—lips that felt almost cauterizing in their heat.

"How beautiful you are!" Enrico murmured, drawing her close to his chest. And what followed was a frenzy of frenetic embraces.

Weary, exhausted, yet still insatiable, they finally paused; and then the young man spoke thus to the girl he adored:

"Listen, Virginia: I deceived you, it is true. But I deceived you because I loved you, because I adored you, just as I love and adore you now. I am no mere laborer; I am a gentleman, a member of a

family possessed of great wealth and influence. If I were to marry you against their will—and as for their consent, that is simply out of the question—disaster would surely befall me, you, and your brother. In time—perhaps, once my parents have passed away and we have left the Papal States—I might be able to. But why lull ourselves with vain hopes? I love you; I am yours in life and in death. Do you wish to die? Let us die together. I am ready; I swear it to you. Do you wish to live? I have told you before: I own a small villa—which I inherited from a relative—near Albano, with a small plot of land attached. I will make a legal gift of it to you: *inter vivos*[xix], as the notaries say. You shall live there like a queen. I will come to visit you every day. I will stay for weeks, for months at a time, and it will be an oasis of love for us. You will give birth to and raise our child: a bond between us more indissoluble than any marriage. Much and enduring happiness still awaits us, Virginia, if only you wish it so.

"And my brother?" murmured the young woman, feeling sweetly entranced by Enrico's words, which sounded to her ears like the sweetest music.

"Will he not be able to forgive us?"

"Ah! Never. He would kill us both if he were ever to discover us."

"Then? Shall we die, or shall we leave?"

"Let us die," said Virginia resolutely.

"Where? Here?"

"Here."

Enrico drew a double-barreled pistol—richly damascened, of the kind that was just beginning to come into fashion at the time—and coolly cocked it, ensuring that the flints were in good working order; then, he pressed the muzzle against his right temple and said:

"Farewell, Virginia: do as I do."

But the young woman, swift as a flash of lightning, seized his arm and snatched the deadly weapon from his grasp; then, kissing him upon the lips, she whispered:

"Let us leave."

Chapter XXXIII

Francesco Perelli returned home that evening in a state of extreme agitation. He had not seen his sister come out to meet him, and a sinister premonition told him that some misfortune must have befallen her. Upon reaching the door, he found it ajar. He entered—it was dark—lit a lamp, and ascended the small wooden staircase to the upper rooms. But he searched for Virginia there in vain. He looked everywhere to see if he could find any clue from which to deduce where she had gone or what had happened; finally, on her bedside table, he found a folded sheet of paper. He opened it with a trembling hand and read it. It said:

"My brother. A cruel fate—one against which we would have struggled in vain—separates us, perhaps forever. I know the pain these words inflict upon you, and I share it. But time will heal your wound. A good and virtuous wife will take my place in your heart. Yet do not forget me. Do not forget your Virginia—she for whom you were brother, father, and mother all in one; your Virginia, who loves you and will love you always, until the very last breath of her life, and who vows to God that she may one day see you again, appearing before you cleansed of every fault and once more worthy of you. Virginia."

That mysterious letter struck deep into Francesco’s soul. He glimpsed a part of the truth. The strength of his character prevailed over the anguish of his spirit. The following day, upon leaving the house, he announced that his sister had departed Rome to visit some relatives in the mountains. But his declarations were met with ironic smiles and rather malicious remarks—particularly from the women:

"Well, naturally! That poor girl was putting on weight right before our eyes. She must have had some secret ailment in her belly. The mountain air would do her good; in five or six months, she’d be back as slender as ever. There was certainly no need to make a fuss about it. These are the troubles that befall young girls when they make a habit of going out to catch the evening breeze, yet are afraid to go alone."

These and other similar remarks were barbs piercing Francesco’s heart. Nevertheless, he possessed the strength of spirit to conceal his feelings; he replied that Virginia might not be returning, as she had a cousin in the mountains who had asked for her hand in marriage.

"All the better," came the reply. "Cousins in the mountains are made for just that purpose. Otherwise, what would become of poor city girls abandoned by their lovers—great lords disguised as laborers?"

In short, from one word to the next—a remark here, a comment there—Francesco came to learn everything, or nearly everything. Virginia had a lover who dressed like a laborer, yet whose bearing and manners clearly betrayed that he was nothing of the sort. He greeted no one, looking down his nose at everyone he met. He had begun to hover around the house. One evening, he had followed the girl and spoken to her; evidently, they had reached an understanding, for from that day forward, he accompanied her every day, and they would take the longest, most deserted routes. Then, the handsome young man had begun to enter the house; at first, he would stay only for a few moments. But those few moments soon grew into many, and long ones at that. The deed, as the gossiping women put it, was done. There was nothing left to do but head for the mountains.

Francesco suppressed his indignation and devoted all his efforts to finding his sister. A friend of his—who loved Virginia, had wished to marry her, and had been rejected by her—had seen her one evening with her lover and, certain he would recognize him in any guise, joined Francesco in the search. But for a long time, their efforts proved futile. One day, while they were strolling together in Villa Borghese during the fashionable "Corso" hour, the friend gripped Francesco's arm tightly and, pointing toward an elegant young man driving a magnificent pair of horses, said:

"There he is! There he is!"

"Who?"

"Your sister's lover."

"That one?"

"Yes."

Francesco heard nothing more; he dashed after the carriage and pursued it until he saw it enter a palazzo on Via Florida. He then inquired as to the man's identity and learned it. The very next day, he presented himself at the palazzo and asked to see Don Enrico. The latter, suspecting nothing, received him in the presence of his mother. Francesco could not contain himself; the moment he stood face-to-face with him, he burst out:

"What have you done with my sister, you murderer, you cowardly seducer?"

Enrico did his utmost to maintain his composure without further provoking him. But it was a wasted effort. Francesco assailed him with a torrent of insults, thrusting his fists right under his nose.

The mother intervened and had the servants throw him out. The servants, however, went too far; when he attempted to resist, they responded with a rain of blows from their cudgels. Francesco was forced to return home badly battered. He then changed tactics and began to spy on the young man's movements, fully intending to kill him. But Enrico had gone to his villa in Albano to ensure that no danger threatened his Virginia, whom he loved more than ever, and he remained away for several days.

"He has fled, the coward!" cursed Francesco.

A few days later, Enrico returned. He returned radiant with happiness, for he had received the tenderest proofs of love from his beloved Virginia, and had ascertained that his brother had not discovered her hiding place. That evening, around midnight, he was making his way home when he was ambushed by Francesco, who, having learned of his return, had lain in wait near the main gate. No sooner did he spot him than he lunged forward and plunged a dagger into his throat, robbing him of the power of speech; then came a second thrust to the heart, which extinguished his life!

Enrico had fallen to the ground with the very first blow, and Francesco had toppled down upon him. When he rose again, a crimson haze had clouded his reason; he stood there in a stupor, without even thinking to flee the scene of the crime. Had he done so, it would have been a simple matter to evade the consequences of his deed. But he was all but oblivious to his surroundings. By the time the constables arrested him—as we have noted—just a few paces from the very palace beneath whose gate he had stabbed Enrico, a good half-hour had already elapsed.

Chapter XXXIV

When the judge showed Francesco Perelli the portrait of Virginia and the latter recognized it, the task of the judicial inquiry became exceedingly simple. The accused recounted, in minute detail, the story of his sister's affair with the murdered man, a story he had pieced together from neighborhood gossip. Virginia was summoned to testify. Her encounter with her brother was heart-wrenching. She corroborated Francesco's statements, taking care neither to aggravate his legal position nor to cast aspersion upon the memory of her slain lover, whose affection she praised, as well as the noble manner in which he had treated her by way of atonement for her seduction. Francesco seethed with rage upon hearing her speak in the victim's defense; he flew into a violent frenzy, subjecting her to a torrent of insults and vituperation, and cursing the fate that denied him the chance to kill her as well, just as he had killed her paramour.

This outburst alienated the judges against the accused; consequently, despite the mitigating circumstances surrounding his crime, Francesco Perelli was sentenced to death by strangulation. He received the verdict undaunted; when urged to prepare himself for a "good death," he replied that he had been preparing for it from the very moment he resolved to kill the betrayer of his family—the seducer of his sister. When exhorted to grant forgiveness if he wished to receive it himself, he retorted that he would have forgiven only if he had been able to kill Virginia as well—for in doing so, he would have expunged the shame with which she had sullied herself. Entreaties, prayers, and threats alike proved futile. He steadfastly refused to make his confession, spurned those who sought to offer him spiritual comfort, and died impenitent, stepping boldly from the executioner's cart onto the steps of the gallows. Just as I was about to slip the noose around his neck, he recoiled swiftly and, turning toward the crowd, cried out:

"People of Rome! Learn how one exacts vengeance upon the nobility—and how one dies well, having achieved that vengeance!" A few moments later, he was launched into eternity.

Chapter XXXV

As soon as the Confraternity of San Giovanni had detached and transported Perelli's corpse to their church, I had to proceed to the Tordinona prison to fetch the highwayman Carlo Castri, who had been condemned that very day to the gallows and to quartering. It took some time, for the criminal had put up the most vigorous resistance against the jailers, the constables, and myself before allowing himself to be placed upon the cart. He screamed like a man possessed and would have nothing to do with going to his execution. He had barbarously murdered so many people—men and women, old and young—yet he harbored a terrifying fear of death. He implored for mercy in the name of all the Saints in Heaven, screaming that the Holy Father—the representative of a God of goodness and mercy—was bound to forgive him. Let them send him to the galleys, let them lock him in the gloomiest dungeon, but let them spare his life.

We were forced to bind him and gag him to silence his cries. When we arrived at the Piazza del Popolo (which was teeming with a crowd impatient to witness the spectacle of a quartering) a collective sigh of satisfaction rose from every chest.

"There he is! There he is!"

And since news of the resistance he had put up had already spread, voices added:

"Now he is in Mastro Titta's hands; there is no longer any danger of his escaping; no one ever escapes from his grasp."

As I approached the scaffold, I could still distinctly hear several shouts of "Long live Mastro Titta!" And when I finally cast him into the void, the noose tied tight around his neck, applause actually broke out. Indeed, they were clapping for me, though they would have torn me limb from limb had I, by some misfortune, ever fallen into their power at an opportune moment. Fortunately, I knew the moods of the crowd well; I never allowed myself to be swayed by their courtesies, just as I was never intimidated by their threats. Yet, the hanging of that fiend had been no easy task. No sooner had his gag been removed than he began screaming again, begging for mercy and invoking the celestial legions to descend and set him free. He had not fainted, as so many others did; he still possessed his full strength. It was necessary to drag him along and carry him up in our arms while he thrashed and struggled.

With the noose around his neck, he continued to scream; it was the rope itself that finally strangled the words in his throat. Once hanged, he turned a deep crimson, almost black. His eyes

bulged from their sockets, his hair stood on end like spikes, and his tongue protruded from his mouth, now hard and rigid. When I began to quarter him, it seemed to me that his very fibers still quivered with life. Certainly, they had lost none of their natural warmth. The day was bitter cold; the north wind was blowing, and his entrails steamed as if they had just been lifted, scalding hot, from a cauldron. Upon contact with the frigid air, the steam condensed into grease, which settled upon my hands, making them slick and slippery. Before returning home, I required a full pound of soap to scrub them clean. Mixed with the blood and grease, this formed a reddish lather, enough to shave an entire regiment of soldiers.

Even the severed quarters, hanging from the arms of the gallows, continued to steam for a considerable time. I had never before witnessed such a phenomenon. I was obliged to burn the beams of the gallows, for they were no longer fit for use; and as they burned, they gave off a horrible stench which, wafting out through the door of my house, spread throughout Borgo Sant'Angelo… to the considerable annoyance of the tenants, who asked me if, by any chance, I had been roasting hanged men's sausages.

Chapter XXXVI

Carlo Castri was a wine-seller who ran a small country tavern serving food in the Monti Parioli area, just below Ponte Molle. When the weather was fine—in spring, summer, and autumn—people coming from the city would frequent the place, and he would make a decent living. But in winter, and whenever the rain lashed down, not a living soul would set foot in his shop for weeks on end; for the place suffered from a terrible reputation, and the locals took great care to steer clear of it.

He had a voracious appetite for women, and any who happened to stray near his tavern—perhaps to gather chicory or snails—were compelled to pay him a tribute in kind. Perhaps they were not entirely displeased, for Carlo was a handsome man: tall, with a bull-like neck—a sign of untamed strength—regular features, a fair complexion, and small dark sideburns framing his sparkling eyes. If they resisted him, he would abandon his gentle approach for rougher tactics; indeed, it was whispered that more than one woman, having incautiously entered his shop, had been dragged by him into the cellar, never to find her way out again.

To compensate for the scarcity of patrons, Carlo would lie in wait on the road at night, robbing any travelers he encountered—victims he was certain he could easily overpower. Yet he had always conducted his affairs with such cunning that, despite the vile rumors circulating about him, he had never been caught red-handed, nor had he ever suffered any harassment at the hands of the authorities. On the contrary, passing patrols would often stop at his tavern, where he would welcome them with the utmost hospitality. He would tap wine for them from the very casks he usually reserved for himself and for the high-class hunters who—unaware of his sinister reputation—did not disdain to stop at his place for a bite to eat. It must be added that few cooks knew how to roast a piece of game on a spit as well as he did, or prepare a plate of fettuccine, or toss a pair of chickens into a pan and cook them on the spot, right after wringing their necks.

It later came to light that he displayed the very same dexterity in disposing of the travelers he attacked. Relying on the aphorism that the dead generally do not speak, and wishing to avoid denunciation, he had acquired the rather unsavory habit of slitting the throats of his victims and burying their remains in the thickets. It was a highly expeditious method for ensuring both his impunity and the unhindered practice of his banditry, a trade he pursued alongside his professions as innkeeper and hired killer. At dusk on a January day, two hunters, weary and breathless, arrived at Carlo’s inn. They had

been on the move all day, and their game bags bulged with partridges and woodcocks. One was an older man with a full white beard; the other was a youth with not a hair on his face; yet both were strapping figures, cheerful in spirit, and easy in their bearing.

"Master Carlo," said the old man as he entered, "do you have anything to refresh us?"

"Nothing truly worthy of your Lordships, perhaps, but there is something to be had," Castri replied obsequiously, doffing the white cotton cap he wore upon his head.

"Let's hear it: what have you got?" asked the young man.

"About an hour ago, I set a hen to cook, one that had lost the habit of laying eggs for me."

"She likely won't be too tender," the old man observed with a smile.

"But she'll provide us with a fine bowl of broth," his companion remarked.

"You're right, Gustavo."

"I'll toss in a handful of *capellini*—those fine egg noodles I'd prepared for my own supper."

"Excellent." "Then we'll slaughter a couple of chickens and toss them in the pan."

"That's not a bad idea."

"And then?" asked the beardless hunter again, tormented by a ravenous hunger.

"Then there's some salami, some Pecorino cheese, and some eggs."

"All that will serve as our appetizer, won't it, Uncle?" said the young man.

"Have it your way. You look like you could eat the Obelisk of San Giovanni right now. After the chickens, Master Carlo, perhaps you could serve us a couple of roasted partridges?"

"I haven't any, gentlemen, and I regret it. It must be fifteen days since I last saw a hunter."

"You have two right in front of you."

"True enough, and your game bags appear well-stocked."

The young man pulled out two magnificent partridges, and the old man, two woodcocks.

"Magnificent!" exclaimed Castri, after weighing them one by one in his hands. "But if you'll accept a humble piece of advice from me, stick to the partridges. To be truly good, woodcocks need to be well-hung, and these look quite fresh to me."

"Taken half an hour ago. They were the last shots of the day. Carlo is right: partridges are preferable." And he drew two more birds from his game bag, tucking the woodcocks back inside.

Though working alone, the innkeeper had the table laid in moments with cream, salami, fresh bread, and a large flask of wine the color of topaz. The two hunters poured themselves a glass each; after downing them, they clicked their tongues in satisfaction, exclaiming in unison:

"Good! Excellent!"

Just then, the innkeeper entered, carrying two chickens he had just plucked from the coop and slaughtered.

"Wine from the vineyards of Montemario," he said. "The more you drink of it, the thirstier you get."

A few minutes later, as the appetizer vanished from the table, the crackle of flames could be heard from the kitchen, accompanied by the gentle whirring of the rotisserie spit. Landlord Carlo entered, bearing a steaming tureen of *capellini* in broth.

"You are a miracle worker!" the old hunter exclaimed, already savoring the taste in anticipation.

And Gustavo—no less a glutton than his uncle, perhaps even more so—added: "This will warm our bellies and put us in the mood to drink your cellar dry!"

The innkeeper bowed with a smile and returned with a platter of pan-fried chicken, wafting a most delicious aroma. The contents of that platter, too, vanished into the capacious bellies of the two hunters. The same fate befell the roasted partridges; to wash them down, they ordered a second flask of wine, the first having already been drained. Once the pangs of hunger had been fully appeased, uncle and nephew struck up a conversation; from it—listening closely from the adjoining kitchen—the innkeeper gathered that the two hunters were wealthy gentlemen carrying a considerable sum of money. They had left Rome three days earlier and had been hunting continuously, pausing here and there to rest in country taverns, for they had entered into a wager of endurance.

"Do you admit defeat, Gustavo?" asked the older man.

"I could not truly say 'defeated,' for I am capable of continuing for another week. But you are certainly the victor, Uncle, since you have surpassed the agreed-upon limit. You are a strong man."

"Does that displease you?"

"Not in the least. And here are the fifty sequins of our wager."

As he spoke, the young man drew forth a silk purse; he counted out the sequins due to his uncle, and the remainder—still a goodly number—he returned to his pocket. The old man, in turn, drew out his own purse (likewise well-stocked with gold coins)let his nephew’s sequins drop into it one by one, and, slipping it back into his pocket, said:

"When all is said and done, this is wealth that must belong to you sooner or later."

"May that be as late as possible."

"Thank you for the sentiment, my nephew; I take it to be sincere. My coffers, in any case, are always open to you."

Chapter XXXVII

Just then, the innkeeper reappeared; he had witnessed the exchange of coins and calculated how much the two purses might contain.

"If the gentlemen should wish to rest here," Castri said humbly, "I have a good bed; I will put fresh-laundered linens upon it, and I myself will sleep here on a bench."

Gustavo consulted his uncle with a glance before replying. The older hunter stepped toward the door and saw that the sky was clear and glowing white with moonlight.

"No, thank you, Master Carlo. We wish to return to Rome this very evening. The weather is fine. It is cold, but we are well bundled up."

The innkeeper bowed.

"The bill?" asked Gustavo.

"Oh! A trifle, really. Pay whatever you see fit."

The older hunter drew out his purse once more, took out two zecchini[xx], and tossed them onto a plate left sitting on the table.

"For you, Master Carlo. Always keep a glass of wine reserved for us, one just like the one you served us tonight. It is truly excellent."

"And may the Good Lord guide you often back this way," replied the innkeeper, his eyes gleaming with greed.

Having unleashed their dogs, the hunters stepped outside with their carbines slung over their shoulders and set off along a cross-path that, after winding its way for a good distance, descends toward the Arco Oscuro. But they had taken no more than a hundred paces when one of the dogs let out a sharp whimper and collapsed to the ground; the other was not long in doing the same.

"What ails these beasts?" asked the older man, seized by a vague suspicion, as he bent down toward the two poor creatures, which had dragged themselves toward a bush and now showed no further signs of life. Suddenly, two rifle shots rang out in the solitude of the night, and the two hunters fell lifeless beside their dogs. Both had been struck squarely in the chest, and almost at point-blank range, by the rifle of Carlo Castri, who lay hidden behind a hedge he had reached ahead of them by taking a steep, narrow path. The brigand sprang out the moment he saw them fall and, with two thrusts of his knife, finished them off. Then, hoisting them onto his shoulders one by one, he carried them into

the nearby thicket; he did the same with the dogs, which he had poisoned before the hunters had even left his tavern. He hastily dug a grave, tossed the two dogs inside, and immediately filled it in with earth; then he set about doing the same with the two corpses, which he had stripped naked so as not to lose a single item of their property.

In the bright light of the full moon, the faces of the two murdered men took on a strange, menacing aspect in the innkeeper's eyes. He was seized by a panic unlike any he had ever known. He struggled to force the hunters' heads down into the grave (which was not deep enough) but they seemed to spring back out, as if driven by some internal mechanism. The north wind rustled through the tree branches, and to Castri, the sound seemed like a confused murmur of voices drawing ever closer. Before long, he was in the throes of delirious terror. He hacked furiously at the buried men's heads with his hoe, yet he could not make them disappear. The moon would shine upon them once more, and to him, they seemed to be sneering. He rose, gathered their clothing, and fled. But after taking only a few steps, he collapsed in a faint.

At daybreak, two peasants discovered the buried corpses—their heads protruding from the soil—and, despite their consternation, rushed to alert the constables they encountered on the Via Flaminia. The constables, having reassured the peasants, were led to the scene; there, while searching the surroundings, they found the innkeeper—still unconscious—clutching the *corpus delicti* (the stolen goods) in his arms. They were forced to lift him up and carry him to the Arco Oscuro; there, having laid him upon a cart and bound him securely, they had him transported to the prisons of Rome, escorted by one of their own number. The others proceeded to unearth the bodies of the two hunters.

Carlo Castri, still in the throes of feverish delirium, hovered between life and death for several days; however, the solicitous care of the jailers and the prison physicians saved him, allowing the legal proceedings against him to commence. Overwhelmed by the evidence of his crime, he made no attempt to deny it; instead—urged on by the judges—he confessed to the robbery of the two hunters, as well as to other crimes. The judges, seeking to extract the secrets he had hitherto guarded so cunningly, dangled before him the prospect of a royal pardon as a reward for his candor. And with every new confession, his conditions of imprisonment improved. Yet, just when Carlo Castri believed he had saved his own skin, the sentence was pronounced: he was condemned to the gallows and to be drawn and quartered. We have already seen how he received this verdict, and how he ultimately expiated the penalty for his misdeeds.

Chapter XXXVIII

However, the execution I was called upon to carry out on the 18th of the following month of March—involving five bandits arrested in the famous Faiola thicket, from which they had taken their name—stirred up a tremendous commotion. That name remains proverbial to this day, and will endure for ages to come: *The Brigands of Faiola*. Their leader was Vincenzo Bellini; his companions were Pietro Celestini, Domenico Pascucci, Francesco Formichetti, and Michele Galletti.

When we entered the Piazza del Popolo in our cart, surrounded by constables and soldiers, the square was teeming with thousands upon thousands of people, packed together like sardines in a barrel. Every window overlooking the square, as well as those in the adjacent streets from which the square was visible, was crowded. Not a single capital, cornice, gate, tree, or architectural projection remained unadorned by people. It was a magnificent spring day; the blue sky was radiant with light, the sun shone brilliantly, and the air was sweetly scented by the gardens of the Pincio and the surrounding area. It seemed as though Nature herself had donned her festive attire, as if to render this legal tragedy all the more solemn and memorable. It took a considerable struggle to traverse the square and reach the foot of the scaffold upon which, with the aid of my assistants, we had erected the gallows and prepared the blocks for the quartering. With the exception of their leader, Vincenzo Bellini, they had all made their confessions; a dozen spiritual comforters of various orders surrounded the condemned men, reciting prayers and offering them crucifixes to kiss.

Upon reaching the scaffold, the comforters disembarked first, followed by myself and one assistant, then the condemned men, and finally a second assistant whom I had been obliged to procure. Vincenzo Bellini was required to witness the execution of his companions—and their subsequent quartering—before being put to death himself. He was a handsome man of athletic build, with a flowing black beard and flashing eyes. He was dressed in the traditional *Ciociara*[xxi] style, like the others, yet not without a certain elegance; and as he cast a glance from the scaffold over the crowd, he spotted several artists (as well as a few English amateurs) sketching the scene and the portraits in their albums. The execution of the first four was as swift as it could possibly be. They had made no attempt at resistance. Once I had hanged the last of them, I began the quartering. Blood flowed in torrents, flooding the scaffold; I was drenched in it, as was Bellini, who witnessed the carnage undaunted:

without batting an eye, without the slightest change in the ruddy-brown hue of his complexion, and without the play of his facial muscles betraying the faintest trace of emotion.

No sooner had I finished hanging the bloody quarters of the executed men from the scaffold's beams than a murmur and a stir arose within the front ranks of the crowd; at that moment, Vincenzo Bellini, tearing apart the bonds that held his hands crossed with a superhuman effort, attempted to throw himself down from the platform. But I was quick to seize him, while the soldiers leveled their bayonets at him. I slipped the small rope with the running noose around his neck, and, grasping the safety line for added security, I guided him up the ladder (while my assistant hoisted him by the feet), from the top of which I launched him into the void. At that very instant, a sharp, heart-rending scream rang out from the crowd—again, from the front lines—and a hundred arms were seen lifting a young woman who appeared to have fainted. Shortly thereafter, it became known that she had died from a ruptured aneurysm.

Chapter XXXIX

How, then, did the arrest of that notorious band of brigands come about: a group that, having established its operational base and habitual hideout—an almost inaccessible lair within the dense thickets of La Faiola—had for so long terrorized the environs of Rome and the Castelli region, reaching as far as Velletri? They preyed upon travelers, public mail coaches, stagecoaches, and private carriages, carrying out kidnappings and extortions of every kind. Only a terrible drama—one that reached its final act at the foot of the gallows on the morning of May 18th—can explain it. Perhaps, had it not occurred, neither Vincenzo Bellini nor his accomplices would ever have ascended the Papal gallows.

Here is the story.

The government, shaken by the ceaseless complaints pouring in from foreign powers regarding the abysmal state of public safety in the Roman countryside, where the lives and property of foreigners were imperiled just as much as (if not more than) those of its own citizens, had finally resolved to launch a campaign against the brigands and to prosecute it with the utmost vigor. Patrols of soldiers were dispatched, led by expert agents intimately familiar with the terrain and seasoned in every cunning trick of the brigand's trade; their primary objective was the forest of La Faiola. The dense thicket was scoured inch by inch, yet yielded no results. Indeed, the patrols were just on the verge of returning to Rome to report on their fruitless expedition when, one day, one of the trackers accompanying the constables and soldiers happened to glance at the ground and spotted some broken, stripped-bare chicken bones.

"Brigadier," he said to the patrol commander, "either I've lost my nose for scenting, or I catch the whiff of the very game we're hunting right here. Look."

As he spoke, he held out the small bones he had gathered, asking:

"Do you know what these are?"

"Are you trying to make a fool of me? They're chicken bones."

"No."

"What are they, then?"

"They are a clue."

"A clue that someone has eaten. That doesn't take much to figure out."

"Bear with me, Brigadier. *Who* ate this chicken? That is what I ask myself."

"That is the question."

"We are at least four miles from any inhabited area, and it is inconceivable that table scraps would be sent all the way here from the surrounding villages."

"Naturally."

"Given the current state of affairs, it is hardly conceivable that a merry party from the city—or from the hill towns—would have come out here to enjoy a picnic *al fresco*, deep within the Faiola woods, considering the sheer terror inspired by its supposed inhabitants."

"So?"

"So, those inhabitants must be anything but ‘supposed’; they must have been right here, a short distance away—and no earlier than this very morning, mind you, for these bones are fresh; they still carry a scent, and they must have been stripped clean of their meat this very day."

The brigadier, who had listened with great attention to the tracker’s reasoning—his mind now enlightened by it—burst out with a shout:

"Bravo!" And he added: "If we find the scoundrels, I swear I’ll treat you—at my own expense—to a dozen chickens to whet your appetite, and two pints of the good stuff to wash it all down."

"Thank you, Brigadier. Now, what remains for us to do?"

"Notify the commanders of the other patrols, and coordinate with them a new, concentric sweep of the woods."

"Brigadier, forgive me, but that is not my advice; allow me to share an idea of my own."

"Speak."

"It’s this: it is inconceivable that the brigands would have come out into the woods to eat in the open air, nor that they would have scattered these bones merely while passing through. They must have been tossed out from some hiding place—a grotto, a cavern, a hollow, any sort of refuge, really—where they are accustomed to taking shelter. We must find it; it cannot be far from here... Quiet!"

"What is it?"

"I thought I heard something like a baby’s cry."

"It’s likely just the shriek of some bird of prey."

"Perhaps. As I was saying, then: we must find their lair."

"Let’s find it."

The men of the patrol, guided by their astute tracker, began to scour the nearby thicket: examining every crevice, clearing away dead leaves, brambles, and vines, and every few steps tapping the ground with the butts of their rifles to check for any hollow spaces beneath.

Chapter XL

Meanwhile, deep within an underground cave, a terrible scene was unfolding. Vincenzo Bellini was inside, alone with his mistress—a stunningly beautiful woman from Velletri, with incandescent eyes and full, voluptuous curves—who was nursing an infant. His companions had left the day before and were not expected to return until late into the night.

The mouth of the cave was sealed and concealed by an enormous stone covered in a thick layer of moss, upon which the brigands had piled brushwood and dead leaves. Yet, owing to an acoustic phenomenon that would be difficult to explain, everything said and done outside—even the sound of footsteps—could be heard perfectly clearly from within the hollow. The brigand leader had immediately sensed the soldiers passing by; at first, he gave it not the slightest thought, but when he heard them halt, he began to grow uneasy… and that unease turned to terror when he caught the words of the guide who had discovered the bones.

"Damn you!" he cursed in a strangled whisper. "Why did you throw those bones out there? It looks as if you set out to be our undoing!"

Meanwhile, sounds of rummaging could be heard around the cave's entrance; the butt of a rifle even struck against the stone, though the noise was muffled by the thick moss. But Bellini's anguish grew even more excruciating when his mistress's infant began to cry and wail.

"Silence that brat!" he roared with savage fury.

But no matter what the poor mother did, there was no way to make the child stop. It cried and cried, its screams growing ever more piercing.

"Silence that brat," Bellini repeated, "or I'll kill him!" The poor woman tried to cover him with her own body, placing her nipple into his tiny mouth. But this only made matters worse. Half-suffocated, the infant threw his head back and let out a heart-rending wail. It was then that the patrol's guide caught wind of him. Hearing his words, the brigand lunged like a wild beast at the wretched little creature; seizing him by the feet, he smashed his skull by dashing it against the ground. Horrible to recount! A fragment of brain matter splattered across the mother's face. A terrible flash of hatred blazed in the eyes of the woman from Velletri, yet she uttered not a single word. At that very moment, the patrol—having met with no success in its search—was moving away.

The following day, Vincenzo Bellini's mistress emerged from the cave to head to Velletri and procure supplies. No sooner had she arrived in the city than she made straight for the bargello's office; there, she denounced the gang and provided all the information necessary to capture them.

That very evening, Vincenzo Bellini and his four accomplices were captured, having attempted in vain to put up a fight—wounding two of the boldest constables who had sought to storm the cave after dislodging the massive stone that blocked its entrance. Yet the woman from Velletri did not seem sated by her vengeance and hatred. She insisted on witnessing her lover's execution; but after watching the fate of his accomplices, when Bellini's turn finally came, she was seized by such a paroxysm of grief that her heart burst.

Chapter XLI

Nine days after the execution of the five brigands of Faiola, I found myself in Collevecchio to bludgeon and quarter Gioacchino De Simoni, the most singular wife-murderer ever to pass through my hands. He was a young peasant, no more than twenty-five years old, madly in love with his wife, Cencia—a woman of his own age, voluptuous in form, lovely of face, alluring in her gaze and demeanor, and exuding from every pore a certain air of sensuality—an air certainly not calculated to soothe the anxieties of a jealous husband. Gioacchino worked assiduously, day and night, to provide his Cencia with every comfort and amenity of life compatible with their economic standing and social station.

He would not allow his wife to attend to anything other than the household; he strictly forbade her from engaging in field labor, fearing that the sun might mar the freshness of her white, velvety skin, or harden the soft contours of her rounded shoulders and lithe arms, those very arms whose embraces drove him to delirium. The choicest morsels at lunch and dinner were reserved for her; and though she wore the traditional local costume, her garments were the finest and most elegant available. Their home, rustic though it was, was kept spotless and furnished with every necessity. It boasted a magnificent bed with chestnut-wood headboards, fitted with sacks stuffed with corn husks, mattresses of fine wool and the softest down, plush blankets, sheets of pristine white linen, and a sumptuous brocade bedspread. It was the altar upon which he celebrated his conjugal rites, and he had insisted that it be worthy of his goddess and of the ecstasies she afforded him.

Gioacchino De Simoni was a man of strapping build and pleasing appearance. Before marrying Cencia, a dozen young women had sighed for him; and even after he had taken a wife, they envied the good fortune that had fallen to the woman who had won him. Yet it is a rare occurrence indeed for a devoted husband not to be a deceived one. The sacrifices you make for a woman she regards merely as a tribute due to her; she inflates her own self-importance—and consequently heightens her demands—in direct proportion to the affection you bear her. Gioacchino did not have a single free minute that was not consecrated to her. But such minutes were scarce, for the enamored young man was forever toiling to make his wife's life joyful and bright. After just a few months of marriage, Cencia had grown weary and bored with the solitude in which her days—and a good portion of her nights—drifted by. Being a stranger to the village, she had no close friends—only mere acquaintances—and no relatives; often, she

simply did not know how to kill the time, for she was ill-versed in domestic womanly arts. Meanwhile, the most dissolute young men of Collevecchio began to circle around her. Whenever they spotted her standing on her doorstep, they would buzz about her, attempting to strike up a conversation. Cencia would answer briefly, fearing she might be caught by Gioacchino, yet she was already beginning to savor the delights of forbidden fruit. Among the many who courted her, there was one—Menico Baldassini—who appealed to her more than all the others. Their chats on the doorstep grew ever more frequent and prolonged until, one fine morning—after glancing up and down the deserted street to ensure that no one was watching—the two of them stepped inside the house.

From that day forth, Menico returned to Cencia's home every day, lingering there for hours on end. Their liaison grew ever more intimate; what had begun as a mere diversion soon blossomed into a consuming passion that absorbed their every faculty. They lived for nothing else but to love one another and to revel in their pleasure. Meanwhile, Gioacchino toiled away, watering the soil with his sweat and moistening the tender shoots. Menico no longer entered through the street door, but rather through the garden gate, which led into the bedroom—a room he entered by clambering over a hedge. And there were embraces, and caresses without number or end. Cencia shared her midday meal with him, spreading a white tablecloth over a small table in the bridal chamber, right beside their defiled marriage bed. They ate from the same plate, drank from the same glass, mingling bites, sips, and kisses, plunging into a whirlwind of ceaseless voluptuousness. Gioacchino, naturally, knew nothing and suspected nothing. Cencia preferred her lover, yet she never ceased to lavish her attentions upon her husband: as prudence advised, and perhaps as her own sensuality urged her. Toward noon on a warm, fragrant day in early May—intoxicated by the rustic scents and the sharp perfume of the freshly cut hay, and seized by an immense thirst for love—Gioacchino headed home to embrace his Cencia. Upon reaching the bedroom door—the one facing the garden—he heard the low murmur of human voices and stopped short:

"Do you love me?" Cencia asked Menico.

"More than life itself. And you?"

"I adore you, my angel. If you did not exist, what a wretched life mine would be!"

"And Gioacchino?"

"Don't speak to me of him; I wish I could be yours always—wholly yours, and yours alone."

And the words of the two lovers died in the exchange of a kiss. The poor, betrayed man took a step, approached the door, and saw his woman seated on Menico's knees in complete abandon: her skirt

hiked up to her knees, her bosom spilling from her bodice, his arm encircling her waist, and one of her hands tangled in his hair. A crimson mist clouded his vision, yet he found the strength to flee. He wandered the fields all day long like a madman; only the cool air of evening seemed to restore a measure of calm to him. A cold fury supplanted his rage; he returned home late to find his wife already abed. He had conceived the idea of a terrible vengeance and set about carrying it out. He filled a massive brazier with charcoal and stoked it until it glowed with a perfect, fiery combustion. Then he fetched two saw-horses, placed them roughly five spans apart, and anchored them firmly to the floor so they might withstand any sudden jolt.

"What are you doing?" Cencia called out from the bedroom, roused by the sound of his hammering.

"I am preparing my supper."

"You're preparing yourself a feast of rusty nails!" the woman laughed; then, rolling over onto her other side, she drifted back to sleep.

Gioacchino then fashioned a small gag and gathered some cords—thin, yet sturdy—and, having completed his preparations, he crossed into the adjoining room and approached the bed. Cencia, still half-asleep, offered him her open lips for a kiss; instead, Gioacchino thrust the gag between her lips and teeth, and, in the blink of an eye, bound her wrists and ankles with the cords before she could utter a single cry. Lifting her bodily in his arms, he carried her into the kitchen. Having laid her upon the trestles, he secured her to them by her arms and legs, binding her tightly; he placed the glowing brazier beneath her loins and stood watching the effects of the burning, savoring his atrocious vengeance drop by drop. At first, Cencia's body gave frequent, violent spasms, and—despite the gag—deep, hollow groans escaped from the depths of her chest. But it was not long before stillness set in. The horrific torture lasted for more than an hour, at the end of which the beautiful form of the unfaithful bride was completely carbonized. The stench of burning flesh and the smoke billowed out through the door gaping open toward the garden, yet they also seeped through the cracks of the door facing the street, spreading through the thoroughfares; and Gioacchino heard a group of young men passing by remark:

"De Simoni is roasting a quarter of a kid goat for Cencia's supper—little does he know she's going to be keeping him waiting a good long while."

A sinister, diabolical smile flickered across his pale, contorted lips. At the break of dawn, having diligently secured both doors, he stepped outside and went to the bargello.

"Who are you?" the officer asked him.

"Gioacchino De Simoni."

"What do you want?"

"I have come to surrender myself to justice."

"Why?"

"Because I have killed my wife."

"The motive?"

"She was unfaithful to me."

"You killed a woman for such a trifle? Do you not realize that if every husband behaved in such a manner, the world would soon be depopulated?"

Gioacchino had the audacity to smile at the bargello's jest, though it was a smile that struck terror into the heart.

"How did you kill her?" the worthy official resumed.

"I burned her alive."

"So, you follow the fine traditions of the Holy Inquisition? Bravo! That might just earn you the good graces of the judges."

Gioacchino was handcuffed and, preceded by the bailiff and surrounded by constables, was led to his home. The crowd surged behind the procession, and when the door to his house was opened, they burst inside. The ghastly spectacle elicited cries of indignation, and the constables had to struggle mightily to shield the wife-killer from the fury of the mob. The women were the most enraged, the most incensed. They heaped insults and abuse upon him, accompanying him all the way to the prison while hurling filth and spitting at him. Gioacchino De Simoni walked on impassively, betraying no sign of anger, remorse, or grief. The vengeance he had exacted had left him so utterly satisfied that any punishment would have seemed light to him.

His trial was convened immediately and concluded with haste; the accused had confessed and provided every detail the judges wished to know. He listened to the sentence—condemning him to death by bludgeoning and quartering—without batting an eyelid. Urged to make his confession, he declared that he had nothing on his conscience to reproach himself for; that his crime was a punishment inspired by God. He rejected all offers of spiritual comfort. He walked to the gallows with unwavering resolve and endured his torment—for which he had long prepared himself—with the utmost indifference, leaving an indelible impression upon the crowd that had gathered to witness it.

Chapter XLII

I inaugurated the year 1817—on January 20th—by performing the first provincial execution by guillotine; this took place in Macerata, where I beheaded the wife-murderer Saverio Gattofoni. An immense crowd had flocked in from Pusolo, Recanati, Civitanova, and all the surrounding villages to witness this novel spectacle, a subject around which the strangest rumors had circulated. It was widely believed that the guillotine operated automatically, driven by some internal mechanical mechanism; thus, there was no small measure of surprise when they saw me arrive alongside the condemned man, ascend the scaffold with him, bind his hands behind his back, push him forward onto the platform, and press the button to send the blade crashing down. It almost seemed to them as if they had been cheated. Saverio Gattofoni was a handsome young man of twenty-eight, a coachman in the service of a charming yet capricious lady who had recently been widowed by an elderly man. He had married her solely for her extraordinary beauty, despite her extremely humble origins—for she belonged, in fact, to a family of the common working class.

Saverio's wife was a good woman—hardworking, diligent, and thrifty—of not unpleasant appearance and a comely figure; her name was Giacinta Pozzuoli. For Saverio, she felt something deeper than mere love—a true veneration—and this devotion was reciprocated by him, if not with equal intensity or ardor, then certainly with sincere affection. Yet his sensual temperament often led him into the arms of other women: liaisons, however, that never evolved into permanent attachments. They were, more than anything else, mere outlets for his exuberant vitality. Moreover, he had never once cast a covetous glance upon the Countess, his mistress; indeed, he regarded her with the utmost deference, even though he knew full well that she had certainly not been born in a bed surmounted by a coronet. One cold autumn evening, Saverio, entering to receive his mistress's orders for the following day before retiring for the night, found her reclining in an armchair before the fireplace, her small, bare white feet clad in red velvet slippers embroidered with gold. She wore a dressing gown of white cashmere, lined with red satin and cinched at the waist by a gold cord. Her dark hair was gathered loosely atop her head, held in place by a gold hairpin. She wore no other ornaments: neither on her ears, nor on her hands, nor on her arms, which emerged bare from the wide sleeves of her gown. The gown, open also at the bosom, revealed her fair throat and the upper curve of a high, full breast, half-covered by a chemise of scalloped batiste, which, through its sheer transparency, rendered it all the

more seductive. Evidently, the Countess had already completed her nightly toilette and, before retiring to bed, had wished to savor the delights of a crackling fire in the hearth—which was surmounted by a tall mirror, tilted slightly so as to reflect the lady's image as well as the far end of the drawing room. No sooner had he lifted the fabric portière than Saverio paused in the doorway, asking with an air of detachment:

"Do you have any orders for me, Countess?"

She did not reply; instead, gazing into the mirror, she proceeded to scrutinize the features of her coachman. And it would seem that the assessment was not unfavorable, for her voluptuous lips curved into a faint smile.

"Countess," Saverio repeated, after waiting a moment, fearing that his presence had gone unnoticed by his mistress.

The lady still offered no reply. She amused herself by watching, in the reflection of the dressing-table mirror, the handsome yet vexed face of the coachman.

"Do you have orders for me?" Saverio repeated once more.

"Are you in a hurry?" the lady finally replied with a teasing air.

Saverio raised his head, and his eyes—turning by chance toward the mirror—met a fiery gaze from the Countess, reflected therein. He stood transfixed, realizing that the senses of this voluptuous woman must, at that very moment, be highly aroused; yet not a single thought, however fleeting, crossed his mind that was in the least disrespectful toward his mistress.

"If I let you go now, where will you go? To carouse, most likely."

"No, Countess; I have no such habit. I shall go home to my wife."

"Ah, yes. You are married. I had quite forgotten."

As she spoke, the lady made a gesture of annoyance; then she added:

"What a mania it is—to marry so young and saddle oneself with such encumbrances!"

"Family," the coachman mumbled, simply to say something; and the Countess retorted:

"Family! Family! One already has a family when one is born, and there is always time enough to start another before one dies."

Toying with the tassels of the sash that cinched her dressing gown at the waist, she had untied the knot; the garment now fell open ever wider at the front, revealing treasures that began to inflame the easily kindled imagination of the young coachman.

Chapter XLIII

"How long have you been married?" the Countess resumed asking, with the indifferent air of someone questioning merely to distract herself and kill time, rather than out of genuine curiosity.

"Two years."

"And you haven't cheated on her yet?"

"Oh! A few times."

The Countess's dressing gown, no longer held fast by its sash, had fallen open down to her feet. She gathered the edges to cross them over her bosom; yet she did so so slowly that her entire figure—divinely sculpted and rosy beneath the sheer fabric of her chemise, and glowing with the reflected light of the red satin lining—appeared mirrored in the looking-glass before the coachman's avid eyes. This time, it was his blazing gaze that met hers. The psychological moment was drawing near.

"So, you have a mistress?" the lady asked, resting her head against the backrest of the armchair in an attitude of utter abandon.

At that very instant, a burning ember—as if moved by some secret force—tumbled out of the fireplace, landing near the Countess's dainty feet. Saverio rushed forward to retrieve it; kneeling down, he leaned against the armchair, his feverish hand brushing against the lady's body, for she had now thrown herself back completely onto her back, her eyes closed. Driven mad with desire, Saverio clasped her in both his arms, pressed his lips to hers, and took her.

All through the night, Giacinta waited for him in vain in their lonely bed. From that fateful evening onward, the liaison between the mistress and the coachman grew ever more intimate, steadfast, and tenacious; a terrible passion raged within them both… and with that passion came the Countess's jealousy of her lover's wife. She would no longer allow Saverio to go home to sleep, going so far as to forbid him from seeing Giacinta for weeks on end. The poor woman was still far from understanding the cause of her husband's behavior. She reproached him for his coldness, and, as all unhappy wives are wont to do, through a ceaseless barrage of complaints, scenes, and nagging, she made herself tiresome and unbearable to him. Meanwhile, the Countess's love grew more demanding with each passing day; she sought to absorb every ounce of Saverio's vitality into herself. One night, during one of those moments of delirium in which human reason drowns, she asked him point-blank:

"What use is Giacinta to you? Why don't you get rid of her?"

"I've told her to leave so many times, told her that I set her free to live her own life. But she turns a deaf ear to it."

"And even if she *did* leave, what good would that do?"

"It would mean no more aggravation."

"That's not enough—it's not enough! I want you—mine, all mine."

"Am I not already?"

"I want everyone to know it."

"Few are unaware of it by now."

"They know you are the mistress's lover, and perhaps they despise you for it…"

"What do I care, so long as I am happy—blissfully happy in your love?"

"If it doesn't matter to you, it matters to me."

"Well?"

"You must become my husband."

"You know that's impossible."

"Impossible? You fool."

For that night, the Countess said no more. She feared alienating Saverio's affections. She needed to give him time to grow accustomed to the idea of ridding himself of his wife forever—to familiarize himself, as it were, with the crime she was suggesting.

Chapter XLIV

The sinister notion had by now taken root in Saverio's mind, gnawing at his very brain. He tried to drive it out, but it returned: insistent, provocative, inexorable. For several days, he sought to numb himself through debauchery. Yet, even amidst the revelry, the figure of the wretched Giacinta rose before him like a menacing specter. And he felt the need—felt an uncontrollable urge—to be rid of her. He found himself in the grip of a sort of criminal obsession.

The Countess understood the battle raging within the coachman's soul, and she allowed it to run its full course without offering a single word of encouragement. She merely continued to intoxicate him with her love, a love so intense it nearly sapped his robust constitution. But his resistance dragged on too long. Saverio—fully resolved to kill his wife, and eager to be done with it once and for all—could not bring himself to act; he kept putting off the deed from one day to the next, from evening to morning and back again. The Countess therefore decided to change tactics and spur him to commit the crime by withholding her favors until he had carried it out, since lavishing them upon him had proven futile. And so she did.

Within a week, Saverio was in the throes of erotic delirium. The Countess teased him at every turn, yet obstinately denied him her favors—now with one pretext, now with another—until, finally, one night she went so far as to tell him:

"I no longer find you attractive. You bore me."

Saverio rose from the bed where he lay with the Countess, dressed himself, and left, without her uttering a single word to him. He went home and slipped silently into the marital bedroom. Giacinta was asleep; yet she appeared to be in the grip of a nightmare, her breathing labored and gasping. All her limbs were convulsing; her lips quivered; her brow was drenched in sweat. Saverio witnessed all this by the dim glow of the night lamp resting on the small table beside the bed, and he felt himself overcome by a sense of pity. In her restless tossing amidst the bedclothes, Giacinta's body had become completely exposed, and her exquisite contours lay revealed to her husband's gaze, chaste, even in their nakedness. And to the feeling of pity that had seized him, memories of the old love—the love this woman had once inspired in him, and for the sake of which he had made her his wife—began to return. In his right hand, he held the razor-sharp knife he had procured to perpetrate the crime; yet, as he sought the spot where he would strike, his gaze wandered instead across the soft contours of her

exquisitely sculpted bosom and the alabaster whiteness of her belly: slender, gently rounded, and softly shadowed.

Suddenly, Giacinta awoke; she raised a hand to her chest as if to shield herself, and, opening her eyes, recognized Saverio looming over her, the knife still brandished in his hand.

"Ah! So it is not a dream, then?" she exclaimed, adding—with a tone blending both bitterness and contempt—"Murderer!"

That insult was her death sentence. Had she not uttered it, perhaps Saverio would have fallen at her feet, begged her forgiveness, kissed her, embraced her, and loved her as he once had; he would have become intoxicated by her caresses; her embrace would have made him forget that of the Countess—perhaps, indeed, it would have rendered the latter utterly loathsome to him. That insult made the blood rush to his head; a red mist rose before his eyes, and he felt a jet of crimson blood splash across his hand and face. His right hand—almost unconsciously—had driven the sharp knife straight through the poor woman's heart.

Giacinta uttered not a single word. She cast upon her husband a gaze filled with love and forgiveness, and breathed her last. Saverio was seized by a dizzying terror. He wanted to flee, yet felt as if he were chained to the bed. One arm of the stiffening corpse lay outstretched toward him, and he felt as though that arm had taken hold of him; he struggled to break free and bent the limb back toward the dead woman's chest, but with a convulsive jerk[xxii], the arm reached out toward him once more.

Chapter XLV

Finally, with a supreme effort, he cast aside the knife—which he still brandished—and managed to tear himself away from the scene. He rushed out without closing the door behind him; he hurtled down the stairs, and upon reaching the street, he began to run like a madman. Every now and then, he would pause for a second, glance back over his shoulder, and then resume his flight, faster and more frenzied than before. He imagined he saw the murdered woman chasing him. Once outside the city, he plunged into the open fields, running on and on without pause. And so he continued until he finally collapsed: utterly spent, broken, and unconscious. At daybreak, some peasants shook him and bent down to lift him up; but seeing him drenched in blood, they assumed he was the victim of a crime and headed into the city to raise the alarm. Half an hour later, the constables were lifting him to his feet, and by splashing water on his face, they brought him back to his senses. No sooner had he revived—and, regaining consciousness, realized he was in the hands of the constables—than he burst into desperate cries:

"Yes, yes, it was me! I killed her—poor Giacinta! Look, look at these hands: they are stained with her blood!"

His frenzied agitation bewildered the constables; they could not tell whether they were dealing with a madman or a criminal. But to be on the safe side, they handcuffed him and began leading him toward the prison. Meanwhile, news of the crime had spread throughout the city, discovered by a friend of Giacinta's who, having gone to visit her and finding the door ajar, had walked right in. The moment he was seen appearing back in the city, the shouts began:

"There he is! There he is—the murderer!"

The constables still did not fully grasp the nature of the situation; yet, they tightened their grip on Saverio. "He killed his wife in bed with a knife thrust to the heart!" the people screamed. And the wife-killer nodded his head in assent, answering in a hoarse voice:

"It is true! It is true."

Before long, the crowd—which continued to swell—turned menacing. From hurling verbal insults, they escalated to physical attacks; they pelted him with sticks, stones, and vegetable cores, reviling him in every conceivable way. The constables struggled to defend him, fearing that at any moment he might be snatched from their grasp and torn to pieces. The women were the most venomous

of all. One old harridan even managed to strike him on the head with a fire shovel, inflicting a wound on his forehead from which blood flowed profusely. He was a ghastly sight: his clothes in tatters, caked in dust and mud; his face wild with terror, eyes bulging from their sockets; his teeth chattering as he stood there shivering and dripping with blood. At long last—when God willed it—the prison gates swung open before him, and then slammed shut behind him.

Immediately interrogated by the chief constable, he was unable to answer. It was deemed necessary to leave him to rest for three days, sparing him from any emotional shock—which, according to the physician, could prove fatal. Finally brought before the judge, he gave vent to his anguish, confessing every detail and motive behind the crime.

"Do you know of what you are accused?" the examining magistrate asked him.

"I suppose so."

"Did you kill your wife?"

"Yes."

"With a knife thrust to the heart?"

"Yes."

"Were you in bed with her?"

"No."

"Did you perhaps quarrel?"

"No."

"I warn you: this habit of answering in monosyllables will not do. Give me categorical answers and explain the facts. Only absolute candor can mitigate the penalty you have earned. Were you not sleeping in your own home that night?"

"I hadn't slept there for several months."

"Why?"

"The Countess had insisted upon it."

"Was the Countess your employer?"

"My mistress."

"Mind what you say. If you are attempting to implicate persons of high standing in this crime—hoping to offload some of the responsibility onto them—you are sorely mistaken."

"I am speaking nothing but the truth."

"You claim, then, to have had intimate relations with your mistress?"

"I slept with her every night."

"That is preposterous. How is it that, having a wife who was both lovely and virtuous, you allowed yourself to be led into spurning her affection?"

"It was the Countess who lured me to my ruin. She offered herself to me, and I took her. Afterward, she forbade me from seeing my wife. Later, she advised me to get rid of her."

"In any case, she surely only advised you to send her away—to remove her from the town."

"She didn't explicitly tell me to kill her; rather, she made it clear that if I were to get her out of the way, she would marry me."

"You must have misunderstood her. How could a lady of her station possibly stoop so low as to marry a domestic servant?"

"She was not of noble birth. She had married a Count, yes, but she remained, at heart, exactly what she had always been."

"So, you assert that it was your mistress who armed your hand?"

"Armed my hand? No."

"Who, then, incited you to commit this crime?"

"Even that is not entirely accurate. After telling me she would marry me, she never mentioned the matter again."

"Perhaps it was merely a jest—or a fleeting, idle notion, tossed out in a moment of intoxication."

"Perhaps so, Your Honor, just as you suggest. But the fact remains that, after having gone to great lengths for me—and seeing that I could not bring myself to make a decision—she denied me her favors; she told me she no longer liked me, that she was bored."

"And you took your revenge by killing your poor, honest wife. Heed my advice: speak no more of the Countess. You would only cast an ominous shadow—quite needlessly—upon a respectable and illustrious household. By remaining silent, you will earn the judges' clemency." Saverio Gattofoni held his tongue, and as a reward for his discretion, he was sentenced merely to be beheaded, rather than drawn and quartered. The judge had kept his promise. Yet I doubt the criminal appreciated the leniency shown to him all that much.

On the very morning of the execution—having refused to depart any sooner, for fear of sparking rumors and drawing suspicion upon herself—the Countess left Macerata in a post-chaise bound for Ancona, where she intended to embark upon a long sea voyage. She appeared proud, radiant,

and smiling. She accepted, with the utmost composure, the farewells of all her friends and acquaintances from her husband's circle. And so she departed, accompanied solely by a manservant of athletic build who—while observing all the deference due to her station—nonetheless made it clear that he was the one in charge. Evidently, Saverio already had a replacement.

Chapter XLVI

Two months passed before I was called upon to perform my duties again; nor, truth be told, did I regret it, for in the summer season the trade becomes more arduous and difficult, especially when it involves hangings and quarterings. On July 19th, I was charged with the beheading of Agostino Del Vescovo, who had treacherously murdered his master, a priest residing at San Pietro in Vincoli. The affair had unfolded as I am about to recount.

Agostino Del Vescovo was a young man given over to every manner of vice: a gambler, a drunkard, and a womanizer, he had squandered the money he had inherited from his father without ever giving a thought to dedicating himself to any trade or profession whatsoever. Left completely penniless, he subsisted for a time by running up debts on every side. But the day came when he could find no further credit, and that evening he went to bed without having broken his fast. One does not sleep well on an empty stomach, and Agostino spent the night sleepless—yet not fruitlessly so; not fruitlessly, for he pondered deeply what course of action would best serve his interests.

The next morning, no sooner had he risen than he went to a church near his home and found a way to pry open the alms box, from which he extracted enough to sustain himself for several days. Yet he did not leave the church on that account. With admirable boldness and composure, he remained there and listened to three or four Masses, kneeling with the utmost compunction before the high altar. The following day he returned, and so he continued for a full week; at the end of that time, he was obliged to repeat the rifling of the alms box, an operation in which he succeeded perfectly. That very day, he went to confession and approached the Eucharistic table. His piety began to attract notice, yet not the slightest suspicion fell upon him. So he asked for permission to serve Mass, and before long, he became the most influential altar boy in the parish. Among the celebrants was a good-hearted priest who lived alone and had taken a liking to Del Vescovo.

"What is your trade?" the priest asked him.

"I have none. My father and mother passed away recently, and my relatives have squandered everything I had."

"Poor fellow! And how do you make a living?"

"I live by performing services for anyone who asks, and by running errands."

"That is neither a very comfortable nor a very cheerful life."

"It is a most sorrowful one; but then again, what choice do I have? God willed it so, and I resign myself to His holy will. Perhaps it is for the good of my soul."

"Listen: if I were to secure you a position as... as a manservant—a trusted aide, essentially—in the household of a gentleman who lives alone, would you accept it?"

"Would I accept it, Don Asdrubale? I would do more than just accept it! It would feel like an undeserved stroke of good fortune."

"Very well, then; if you are willing, I shall take you on myself. The manservant I had before has returned to his hometown; you shall take his place."

Agostino seized the priest's hand and, kissing it with the deepest emotion, pressed it to his heart and exclaimed:

"Don Asdrubale, it is the very path to Paradise that you are opening up for me! I may be inexperienced, but I shall be as obedient and faithful as a dog."

The very next day, Del Vescovo no longer needed to open alms boxes to make a living. He had entered the service of Don Asdrubale; he had a neat and tidy room in the priest's house: an advance of twenty scudi to cover kitchen expenses, the keys to the priest's cellar and pantry: in short, room, board, and a monthly wage of ten scudi. Don Asdrubale even insisted that he hire a maidservant to handle the more menial chores: washing dishes, fluffing the beds, sweeping the rooms, fetching water, and the like. Before long, Agostino had become the master of the house—if not the master himself, in all but name. Don Asdrubale loved fine cuisine, and Agostino prepared it with unrivaled skill. Don Asdrubale loved a good bottle of wine, and Agostino knew how to unearth the finest casks from the local estates; nor was Don Asdrubale immune to feminine charms, and Agostino was always bringing him some new penitent—young and comely—some stray little lamb to be guided back onto the righteous path.

Dialogues of this sort would frequently take place between the priest and his manservant:

"Agostino, I haven't seen that little turtledove who came here to confess to me two weeks ago."

"She hasn't shown her face since."

"And why is that?"

"Don Asdrubale must have touched her heart, and now she has no more sins left to atone for."

"What a pity. She was so pretty."

"If Don Asdrubale permits, I shall present him with another one tomorrow: a sixteen-year-old orphan girl, lovely as an angel, who is in dire need of a spiritual guide to help her resist the seducers who swarm around her from dawn till dusk."

"Well done, Agostino! Bring her here, and we shall offer her some sound advice."

"The trouble is, she is living in destitution, and Don Asdrubale knows full well what a poor counselor destitution can be, especially for a comely young maiden."

"We will do our best to help her—insofar as our strength allows—and then we will arrange for her to receive some financial assistance."

"I thank you in advance on her behalf. God will reward you."

Chapter XLVII

The renown of Don Asdrubale's generosity—coupled with that of Agostino Del Vescovo's influence—gradually spread throughout Rome, and the capable manservant found himself constantly besieged by petitioners of every stripe, though invariably of the female variety.

"Sr Agostino," a woman in her forties said to him humbly, "I am a widow with four children."

"And what would you have me do? If you are seeking a small stipend—a few lire, perhaps—I might take the liberty of granting it to you in Monsignor's name."

"That is not precisely what I need."

"What is it you want, then?"

"My eldest daughter is fifteen years old. She is as innocent as spring water."

"She will grow worldly enough in time."

"Fresh as a rosebud."

"Would you care to offer her…"

"I would like to find her a protector."

"That is the very best thing a widowed mother can do."

"Don Asdrubale is so charitable."

"If he were to heed every request, he would need to be the Grand Sultan—who, by all accounts, possesses coffers overflowing with diamonds and rubies."

"With your recommendation, Sr Agostino... It is well known that Don Asdrubale follows your every counsel... We would certainly not forget you, either."

"Very well, let me see her."

"Shall I bring her here?"

"No; tell me where you live. I will come to pay you a visit, and if she is as you describe her, I shall speak to Monsignor about the matter." (Del Vescovo was in the habit of addressing the priest by this title—even though it did not strictly apply to him—in order to lend greater importance to himself.)

"Would you be so kind as to tell me when you intend to come, so that I may prepare her a little? You know how it is: young girls are shy and a bit flighty."

"I shall come this evening. Where exactly?"

"Via della Lungara—the door just past the corner, on the right."

"Very good."

The diligent manservant did not fail to keep the appointment; He took every possible measure to ensure that the young woman was worthy of Don Asdrubale's favors; once he deemed her so, he would present her to the priest as a grateful gift and share in the gratuities. At times, it was Don Asdrubale who entrusted him with some difficult mission. In such instances, he invariably chose the after-lunch hour to speak with him about it.

"Agostino: after the coffee, bring me a bottle of that ten-year-old Genzano that Monsignor Calotta sent me."

"I shall serve it immediately."

"Excellent! Bring a glass for yourself as well."

"It is too great an honor, Don Asdrubale."

"You are a fine connoisseur. Wine is best enjoyed when shared."

"As you wish."

The astute waiter grasped the situation instantly; as he descended into the cellar, he rubbed his hands together, contemplating the benefits he stood to gain from the transaction. Agostino carried in on a finely chased silver tray two Venetian crystal goblets and a bottle—covered in dust and cobwebs that attested to its great age. He uncorked it with the utmost care, ensuring the wine would not be muddied should it happen to have thrown a sediment; after pouring a mere two fingers into his own glass, he filled the priest's to the brim. The priest watched these preparations with evident satisfaction, his nostrils flaring as he savored the nectar in anticipation through its very scent. Then he spoke:

"Fill yours as well."

Agostino obeyed. After sipping half his goblet, Don Asdrubale asked his faithful waiter (who had likewise consumed his own portion with moderation):

"What do you think?"

"Divine."

"Oh! Oh! *Divine*, indeed."

"Forgive me—I meant exquisite."

"You sly rascal. I forgive you because you are so intelligent."

"Your kindness is boundless."

"Tell me, then: what news is there?"

"None, Monsignor."

"Oh, come now—*Monsignor*! You know I am no such thing."

"Only because you choose not to be."

"And I choose not to be because, thank Heaven, I have no need of it. I have all that I require. Speaking of which: did you give those twenty scudi to that good girl?"

"Immediately."

"And she hasn't returned yet?"

"She won't be long now."

"I shall be pleased to see her again."

"I can have her announced, if you wish."

"No, no. For the moment, I have other matters on my mind. Pour me some more. You weren't paying attention."

"To what, Monsignor?"

"To that young girl who is always standing in the doorway of the shop right next to our gate?"

"She is the wife of the barley-water seller."

"Married? By Jove, one wouldn't think so; she looks so young."

"She has been a bride for only eight days."

"A Roman?"

"From Genzano."

"Does she not wear the traditional costume?"

"She comes from a respectable family."

"Let us, then, drink another sip of Genzano, for there is nothing else to be thought of."

"Why, Monsignor?"

"Oh, enough with the ‘Monsignor’! She surely has a confessor of her own already."

"I do not believe so. She has only just arrived from her hometown. I could speak to her on your behalf."

"I would not wish to give rise to any malicious speculation."

"You know my discretion."

"Oh! In that regard, I have nothing but praise for you. But what if her husband were jealous?"

"Being a newlywed, it is quite likely that he is. Yet that presents no difficulty."

"You think so?"

"The wives of jealous husbands are always in need of sound counsel on how to conduct themselves."

"You sly fox!"

Chapter XLVIII

After two or three days, once the priest had finished his supper, the waiter would ask him:

"Don Asdrubale, wouldn't you care to rinse your palate with a glass of Est-Est[xxiii]?"

"Why not? Agostino, you are a marvel. You read my tastes perfectly. Tonight, it is truly the nectar of Montefiascone that is called for. Bring a small flask. You shall have a glass yourself."

"That ought to loosen my tongue."

"Do you have any news to share with me?"

"Most important news."

"Hurry up. Don't let me die of impatience." Agostino had already set out the suggested wine on the sideboard and served it immediately.

"So, what were you saying?"

"I spoke with the barley-seller's wife."

"And?"

"She is on bad terms with her husband."

"Is she? How come?"

"It’s a long story."

"Tell it as briefly as you can."

"Her parents had promised her a dowry of two thousand scudi, to be paid after the wedding. The barley-seller took them at their word. But once the marriage had been celebrated, the two thousand scudi never materialized."

"That’s a scoundrelly trick, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean, 'yes and no'?"

"From the standpoint of honesty, it is certainly a scoundrelly trick; but from the standpoint of our business, it could prove very useful."

"I don't follow you; explain yourself better."

"It’s like this: once the initial ardor had cooled, the barley-seller began to hound his bride about the dowry. The poor woman hasn't had a moment's peace since. 'I don't know what I wouldn't do,' she told me, 'just to be able to throw the money right in his face.' 'Well, it wouldn't be difficult for you to

find it,' I replied, 'provided you were willing.' 'And who do you expect to give it to me?' she asked; to which I answered: 'There are charitable people in this world.' ‘Men never give anything for nothing,’ murmured the barley-seller, and I replied: ‘Naturally! But when all is said and done—when it comes to getting oneself out of a bind and winning back one’s husband’s favor…’"

Don Asdrubale had been following Agostino’s account closely; when the latter paused at this point, the priest asked breathlessly:

"And she?"

"She smiled."

"A good sign! But two thousand scudi—good heavens!—that’s no small sum."

"She’s worth it."

"That’s how it seems to me, too."

"A fresh young bride…"

"She is everything one could possibly desire. But I don’t have the funds available right here. I’d have to have them sent to me. I’ve got about fifteen hundred in the strongbox, but I need that for other expenses." As he spoke, the priest seemed to be reasoning with himself; every now and then he would break off, as if his thoughts had drifted elsewhere. The manservant followed his every movement with his eyes, but did not utter a sound.

"Did you add anything else?" the priest asked suddenly.

"We continued the conversation. The barley-seller said to me: 'That’s madness! I don’t know a soul in Rome.' 'In that regard, I could help you,' I replied. 'There’s my master, you see—Don Asdrubale.' 'Yes, I know him; people say he’s a saintly man.' 'And they speak the truth. He was just speaking about you yesterday.' 'About me?' 'Yes, about you. You’ve awakened in him a most ardent desire to speak with you. He would like to become your spiritual director.' 'Why, I haven’t even gone to confession yet since coming to Rome! And do you think...?' 'I think that if you were to ask him for those two thousand scudi, he wouldn’t refuse you.' 'If only! He seems like such a charming man.'"

"She called me 'charming'?"

"Yes, sir, charming."

"And you?"

"I gave her my word that I would speak to you about it."

"So, is she willing to come to me?"

"To make her confession, yes. On Thursday, her husband has to go to Genzano—from where he won't return until Saturday—and she intends to take advantage of the opportunity, once the shop is closed, to come without any hindrance."

"Two thousand scudi is a rather hefty sacrifice; however, I can bear it without any hardship. I'll have my notary advance the funds to me tomorrow, and the evening after that… if she comes, if she proves to be good and compliant…"

"On that score, you need have no doubts."

"If she proves to be good and compliant, I shall give them to her."

"I may, then, convey the glad tidings to her."

"Go ahead and tell her. You know that once I've made up my mind, my mind is made up."

Don Asdrubale went to bed and dreamt of the beautiful barley-seller. Agostino did likewise, and dreamt of the two thousand scudi.

Chapter XLIX

As dusk fell on the appointed day, Agostino—having prepared everything necessary for a delightful cold supper in the drawing room and received Don Asdrubale's instructions for the following day—left the priest alone in the house to await the beautiful barley-seller. She had made it a condition that no one was to catch sight of her: neither upon her arrival, nor upon her departure, nor at any moment during her stay.

The day had been hot and sultry, but in the afternoon, a cool breeze had sprung up; it filled the good ecclesiastic with high spirits and set his blood coursing with desire. He paced the apartment impatiently: now pausing to gaze at the sideboard—which the diligent manservant had laid out with elegance and a lavish array of delicacies—and then stepping into the bedroom, which was destined to serve as the stage for their mutual confidences. Every few moments, he would pull out his gold repeater watch to check the time; it seemed to him that the hands were moving far too sluggishly to complete their rounds. His anxiety grew greater with every passing minute.

After checking his timepiece once more, and seeing that a full hour still remained before the appointed time for their rendezvous, he decided to catch a brief nap, if he could manage it. Dimming the wick of the drawing-room's hanging lamp—which was surmounted by an opaque crystal globe and a perforated shade of rose-colored Chinese tissue paper—he stretched out in a spacious armchair; and, with his mind dwelling upon the imminent delights that awaited him, he drifted off to sleep. The silvery chime of the doorbell, rung ever so gently, startled him awake. He sprang to his feet, rushed to the door, and opened it. A superb figure of a woman, wrapped in a voluminous shawl and wearing a large hat covered by a thick veil that concealed even her face and tied around her neck, glided swiftly through the anteroom, extending a gloved hand toward him. Don Asdrubale pressed a kiss to it with the nonchalant air of a Regency-era abbé, and said to her:

"Wait a moment; I shall close the door so that no one comes to disturb us. The window shutters, too, are hermetically sealed from the outside, so no one could possibly suspect that anyone is within."

The barley-water seller bowed slightly in assent, just as a great lady might have done.

"Good heavens!" the priest thought to himself as he carried out his words. "She looks like a lady of quality. Fortunately, Agostino has handled everything properly... and the purse containing the two thousand scudi is ready."

Then, grasping one of her hands with his right and slipping his left arm around her waist, he led her into the drawing room, passing first through a darkened chamber.

"Surely you will wish to rid yourself of these encumbrances," he said to her then—attempting to remove her shawl and lift her veil. "Let us go into my bedroom."

The woman nodded her head in agreement. And so, from the dimly lit drawing room, they passed into the bedroom—a room even darker still, for the wick of the *veilleuse*[xxiv] seemed on the verge of flickering out. After embracing his shapely visitor tightly, Don Asdrubale turned to tend to the flame of the *veilleuse* resting upon the bedside table. But just as he bent over it, a terrible dagger thrust—dealt by the unknown woman—pierced through his neck. The poor priest collapsed face-down, awash in his own blood, unable to utter a single word. The unknown figure bent over him, turned him over and, with a second blow, pierced his heart. Having ascertained that he showed no further signs of life, the murderer began rifling through the pockets of his waistcoat and extracted a small key, with which they unlocked a piece of furniture standing at the foot of the bed, what the French call a *secrétaire*[xxv]. Their eyes blazed in the darkness beneath their veil as he located the pouch; opening it by untying its drawstring, they beheld two thousand scudi in the form of gold Napoleons, fresh from the mint. They took the pouch, rummaged through the other drawers of the cabinet, and extracted additional rolls of gold and silver coins, which they bundled into a small cloth, tying the ends securely. Having secured this handsome haul, they locked the *secrétaire* once more and returned the key to the pocket of the slain priest, taking care not to stain themselves with blood.

Returning to the parlor, they turned up the wick of the lamp, then removed their hat and shawl, placing them upon the armchair where Don Asdrubale had taken his final nap. Thus—emerging from his female disguise—stood Agostino Del Vescovo, the poor priest's faithful valet, who had feigned to secure for him the favors of the *orzarola*[xxvi] solely to better plunder him. Agostino sat down calmly at the table and, with a hearty appetite, devoured the delicacies that had been prepared, taking care to soil the plates and cutlery at both settings so as to foster the belief that two people—the priest and his supposed mistress—had partaken in the supper.

After having eaten and drunk his fill, the murderer returned to the bedroom and ransacked it to make it appear as though a violent struggle had taken place there; he scattered hairpins, a garter, and other small feminine trinkets about the room. Then, he quietly slipped away, closing the door behind him and carrying off the bundle of stolen money, without a living soul catching sight of him. With slow

steps, he descended from San Pietro in Vincoli to the Suburra; opening the small door of one of those disreputable houses, he stepped inside and vanished.

Chapter L

The following morning, Agostino Del Vescovo went to the priest's house as if nothing at all had happened during the night. Upon encountering a tenant of the building, the latter remarked:

"You are quite an early riser today: already out and already back?"

"I went out yesterday after lunch; the master gave me leave, as he wished to be alone."

"Not entirely alone, perhaps, but rather well accompanied."

"What on earth are you saying? Don Asdrubale is a saintly man; he is a model priest."

"Be that as it may," the tenant replied with a sneer, and walked away.

Agostino went upstairs, opened the front door, then the shutters of the parlor; he then leaned out, his face contorted with terror, and cried out:

"Help! Help! They have murdered my poor master! Help! They have killed Don Asdrubale!"

People rushed immediately to the scene at his cries; in an instant, the house was teeming with people, among them, several constables and police agents. Agostino had thrown himself into an armchair, weeping bitterly and uttering heart-rending groans. Nevertheless, he was arrested and brought before Monsignor Fiscale, who had chosen to take upon himself the task of shedding light on the murder.

Meanwhile, Don Asdrubale's body was transported to the cemetery, and the apartment was sealed. Yet, no matter how extensive the investigations, nor how many interrogations Agostino Del Vescovo underwent, the truth remained elusive. It was established that, on the morning of the murder, the priest had collected two thousand gold scudi, and that this sum—along with whatever other cash he kept in the house—had vanished. It was surmised that Don Asdrubale had spent the night with a woman of ill repute, who must have been either the perpetrator or an accomplice in the crime. But nothing more was ever discovered. And in the end, Agostino Del Vescovo had to be released from prison.

To make up for the troubles and suffering he had endured—and failing to realize that the police would continue to keep him under surveillance—he began to lead a dissolute life with a fallen woman from the Suburra district. A sudden search of her premises led to the discovery of a garter identical to the one found abandoned on Don Asdrubale's bed. The courtesan was arrested and charged with the priest's murder. At first, she denied everything outright; but later, seeing that matters were going badly

and fearing she would be held responsible for the crime, she confessed everything she knew: namely, that on the night of the murder she had lent her clothes to her lover, Agostino Del Vescovo, and had dressed him as a woman with her own hands—as he had told her it was merely a prank—that he had returned to her after midnight, and that from that day forward, she had always seen him amply supplied with gold coins.

As soon as he received news of his mistress's arrest, Agostino had fled; he made his way to Ancona, where he intended to board a ship bound for the Levant. But just as he was about to carry out his plan, he was arrested and brought back to Rome, where the skill of his interrogator led him to make a full confession of the crime. Sentenced to beheading, he spurned all religious consolation and faced his execution with cynicism, thereby casting aside the mask of piety he had worn for so long.

Chapter LI

A short distance from Gubbio stood a charming little villa, inhabited by wealthy landowners who led a tranquil and blissful life there. The father also attended to some minor trading ventures and would often be away from Gubbio for two or three days at a time. During these absences, the little family was entrusted to the care of the mother, a chaste and exemplary lady who personally educated and instructed her children: Evelina, a young girl of twelve or thirteen; Paolo, a ten-year-old boy; and Luigi, a child of four. One morning in early August, while her husband was away, Signora Faustina,having to go into Gubbio to run a few small errands, left the house in the charge of the elderly maid, Margherita, and the handyman, Gaetano, instructing Evelina to keep a watchful eye on her younger brothers.

Around midday, while Margherita had gone out to the vegetable garden to take lunch to Gaetano—who was working there alongside eight farmhands—a poor, disheveled wretch appeared at the villa's gate, seemingly seeking alms.

"Come in, come in, good man," said Evelina. "The maid will be back any moment and will give you something to eat."

The supposed beggar entered, and, having crossed the small courtyard, made his way into the villa's ground-floor dining room, followed by Evelina, who was astonished by his audacity.

"Are you alone?" the stranger demanded imperiously of the children.

"Alone? Why?" replied Paolo, growing suspicious of the man's demeanor; he turned toward the door, intending to call for help. But the beggar cut off his path, and, drawing a knife from beneath his jacket, plunged it into the boy's neck.

At this sight, Luigi began to scream at the top of his lungs, and Evelina rushed to him, shielding him with her own body. But the brigand did not hesitate; with the very same knife—still dripping with Paolo's blood—he struck the young girl and the child, felling them to the ground, one atop the other. Terror and pain rendered the two children speechless. The murderer strode resolutely into the adjoining room and ascended to the upper floor—evidently familiar with the layout of the house. Upon reaching the bedroom, he used his blood-stained knife to pry open the locks on the furniture, making off with a rich haul of valuables and money; he then descended once more and made his way toward the villa's

gate. As he was making his exit, he crossed paths with Margherita, who was just returning. Suspicious, she quickened her pace, and upon entering the dining room, she beheld the horrific carnage.

"The beggar! The beggar!" murmured the wounded Evelina.

Margherita, driven mad with terror, gave chase to the murderer—who had fled across the fields—screaming:

"Murderer! Thief!"

Drawn by these cries, Gaetano and the other peasants came running; joining the pursuit of the fugitive, they managed to land a terrible blow to his head with a heavy stick just as he reached the edge of the thicket toward which he was heading. Having fallen, he attempted to rise again, but the peasants were upon him and would have torn him to pieces had Gaetano not intervened to restrain them. They dragged him back to the villa, where they learned every detail of his heinous crime from Margherita, who was busy bandaging the wounds of Luigi and Evelina. Poor Paolo was already dead. The brother and sister were saved thanks to the prompt care of a doctor summoned by one of the villagers. Bound tightly, the murderer was escorted to Gubbio by the bargello; on August 28th, I was summoned to Gubbio to carry out upon him the sentence of decapitation and quartering, as pronounced by the judges.

The atrocity of the crime had so incensed the population of Gubbio that they sought, at any cost, to wrest the prisoner away before the legal sentence—however severe—could be executed, intending instead to torture him to death. Consequently, the authorities deemed it necessary to dispatch a strong detachment of troops to protect the criminal as he was being escorted from the prison to the gallows. Yet, no sooner had the cart emerged than such an uproar arose that the procession was forced to retreat and summon additional troops; these reinforcements militarily occupied the square and every street leading into it, thereby dispersing the crowd. Only then was it possible to lead the criminal—identified as Antonio Casagrande—to the scaffold. Once justice had been served, I was required to place his severed head in a basket and go mount it upon the city gate: the very gate situated just outside the villa where the horrific crime had been committed. Yet, even this task proved impossible. We were forced to wait until nightfall to do so, and the following morning, the sentries had to be doubled to ensure the head was not torn down.

The execution of Antonio Casagrande was the first I ever performed at which the only spectators present were the constables, gendarmes, and soldiers. The screams of the crowd, massed at the street entrances, struck such terror into the condemned man that he ultimately had to be carried onto the scaffold in our arms. Before placing his head beneath the blade, his hair had turned completely

white: a stark testament to the sheer terror that had overwhelmed him. It seems to me I have noted before that the perpetrators of the most ferocious murders invariably prove to be the most craven when standing before the gallows.

Chapter LII

Three weeks later, I carried out another decapitation at Piazza del Popolo: that of Alessandro Papini, a most vulgar brigand who had been captured with weapons in hand at Acqua Traversa after committing a violent robbery. Then, on December 1st, I performed another decapitation in that very same square: that of Domenico Gigli, son of Giacomo, a member of a well-to-do Roman family. In a fit of bestial fury while out boar hunting near Maccarese, Gigli had fired his rifle at a peasant who had caused him to miss a prime shot. Struck squarely in the chest, the unfortunate man had fallen dead on the spot. Gigli had immediately gone to turn himself in and confessed to his crime, attempting to excuse it by claiming he had been blinded by the effects of wine. However, this plea failed to save him from the severity of the judges, who, inexorable in their judgment, pronounced a sentence of death against him, to be carried out using the customary French machine.

I inaugurated the following year on January 13th in Ancona by hanging a Jewish apostate—a man who had exchanged his original name, Angelo Camerino, for that of Giuseppe Angiolo—who had killed a Christian during a brawl. The very next day, January 14th, I traveled to nearby Loreto to behead a violent robber named Ambrogio Piscini; on February 23rd, I beheaded another criminal in Perugia: the brigand Antonio Galeotti. Finally, on April 13th, I resumed my executions in Rome, beheading Andrea Emili—a parricide[xxvii]—in Piazza del Popolo. Emili was the son of a prosperous farmer from Rocca Priora, a man of immense physical strength despite his advanced years, possessing a Herculean build and a resolute spirit. Although he owned many *pertiche*[xxviii] of land, he labored in the fields alongside his son and also worked as a woodcutter. His wife had died quite some time ago, and father and son lived alone; and without women, the household could not run smoothly: for hired help, taken on at a moment's notice, does more harm than good. One day, Antonio Emili said to his son:

"Andrea, things cannot go on like this."

"Why?"

"Can't you see that we lack for everything? We come home in the evening and there is never anything ready for supper, so we have to go out to the tavern. It's the same at noon. On Sundays, our clean laundry isn't even laid out. If, by chance, we were to fall ill, there wouldn't be a living soul to look after us."

"What can I do about it?"

"You can do a great deal."

"Surely you don't expect me to start doing the laundry and cooking the beans?"

"That's not what I'm saying…"

"Then what is it?"

"Take a wife. You're nearly twenty-five now; it's time to make up your mind."

"Where am I supposed to find one?"

"You fool! Must I go so far as to find the girl for you myself?"

"Don't trouble yourself."

"I'll speak to the parish priest about it."

"You'd better not! I want nothing to do with tying myself down to a woman."

"Is that your final decision?"

"It is."

Antonio Emili was not a man of many words. Seeing that his son had no desire to take a wife—yet feeling an absolute need to have a housekeeper in the home, and judging himself still sturdy enough on his legs to attend to the matter personally—he went looking for a bride, and found one. One evening, upon returning home, he said to his son:

"I'm telling you, Andrea: I've found myself a wife."

"For me?"

"Not for you—for me."

"Have you lost your mind?"

Antonio was not a man to tolerate an insult from anyone, least of all from his own son. He banged his fists on the table and demanded of Andrea:

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

"To you," the other replied boldly.

"If you have anything to say against it, you can get out of here right now!" the old man thundered, barely restraining himself.

"This is my home."

"You damned lousy wretch! This is your father's home! For your mother—God rest her soul—didn't have a penny to her name, and everything I possess is mine, absolutely mine."

"You won't live forever, you know; nor can you take your worldly goods with you to the grave."

"I can give them away to whomever I please."

"That is precisely why I don't want you taking another wife."

"Aha! So *you* don't want me to?" Antonio Emili exclaimed, snorting with rage. "Just you wait."

And grabbing the frail Andrea by the collar of his jacket, he hoisted him up over the table, carried him to the door, threw him outside, shut the door behind him, and sat back down. Of a bilious, sanguine temperament, Antonio Emili possessed an extremely impetuous nature, yet was fundamentally a good man. Having finished the meager supper they had prepared for themselves, he took his lamp and went outside to search for his son; but no matter how thoroughly he scoured the surrounding area, he could not manage to track him down. "He must have holed up in some stable or some dive," he concluded, and went to sleep.

The next morning, having risen at dawn, he went into the woods to work. But after a few hours, feeling somewhat weary and drowsy, he lay down on the edge of a narrow path and fell into a deep slumber. Andrea had wandered about all night long, seething with rage against his father, hatching a thousand schemes of vengeance only to abandon them instantly, held back by the salutary fear inspired by the old man's physical strength and courage. Yet, as if driven by fate, at the break of day he, too, entered the woods and began to prowl through the densest thickets like a famished beast.

When he finally spotted his father, he followed him—not daring to approach, yet still consumed by hatred and malice. It was only when he saw him asleep on the path that the horrific idea of killing him to exact his revenge flashed through his mind. And fearing that remorse might overwhelm his soul before he could commit the crime—or that he might be paralyzed by a sudden surge of terror—he wasted not a moment; with a single bound, he was at his father's side, snatched up the axe the old man had laid down beside him, and dealt such a terrible blow to his neck that Antonio Emili's head was severed cleanly from his body. Then, he fled in desperation, running like a madman with no destination. Every now and then, he would glance back, convinced he could hear the sound of his father's footsteps pursuing him. His hair stood on end; his eyes were wide and staring—seeming almost to bulge from their sockets—his face was as white as a corpse's, and his lips were livid and trembling. The people who crossed his path, terrified, would scramble out of the way to avoid him. His flight continued for several hours until, utterly drained of strength and spirit, he collapsed into the hands of a patrolling squad. Finding it impossible to extract a single coherent word from him, and observing the bloodstains on his hands and clothes, the constables bound him and transported him to Rome in a cart.

Imprisonment restored his spirits; within those grim walls, he felt safe from his father's vengeance, the only thing he truly feared. The sheer horror inspired by his own crime had nearly driven him to idiocy. Under interrogation, he recounted to the judge, down to the last detail, the story of the quarrel with his father, his expulsion from home, his nocturnal wandering through the fields, the encounter in the woods, and the murder itself. He was sentenced to beheading and faced his execution more dead than alive: comforted by the priests, it seemed, more in appearance than in reality. Once the sentence had been carried out, I was required to retrieve his severed head from the basket and transport it to Rocca Priora to have it impaled upon the town gate. I performed this task under cover of night to avoid any unnecessary risks.

Chapter LIII

On August 2nd—following the beheading of Andrea Emili (son of the late Giuseppe Dolfi), a convict who had murdered a fellow prisoner at the Colosseum—there fell into my hands, in the course of my official duties, the Roman Raffaele Vattani; he had murdered his wife under circumstances so singular as to merit being recounted. Raffaele Vattani had married Romilda Sangeni when he was barely twenty years old; she was a fair-haired girl of about eighteen, a creature of pure poetry, sentiment, and idealism. Both hailing from wealthy bourgeois families, they possessed the means to lead a gay and brilliant life. They loved one another, yet in ways vastly dissimilar, as befitted their two distinct characters and two opposing temperaments. Romilda—frail and delicate—preferred all that was gentle and refined; she abhorred impetuous outbursts, sudden storms, and what I might call the "tragic" aspect of passion. Her affection for Raffaele bordered on adoration: yet it was a silent, almost religious adoration, finding expression more through deeds than through words. She lavished upon him tendernesses that were almost childlike in their innocence, and subtle gestures of affection that could only have been truly understood by a soul as gentle and sweet as her own. His embraces left within her very fibers long, lingering tremors, at once delightful and utterly enervating. Raffaele, conversely, possessed a temperament that drove him toward the most violent transports of passion. When the frenzy seized him, he ceased to be a man and became, instead, a wild beast: roaring with love, yet finding his wife’s embraces always too cold, too restrained. Terrible scenes would ensue, from which Romilda would emerge utterly shattered.

Her health began to fail. She was afflicted by a wasting sickness—a malady of languor—that made continuous and alarming inroads upon her constitution. The physicians reproached Raffaele for his excesses, and—to all appearances—he suddenly grew calm and underwent a complete change of character. He became kind, docile, patient, and tenderly affectionate. He did not want anyone other than himself to tend to Romilda. He lavished upon her the thoughtful solicitude of a mother and the diligent care of a nursing nun. He was constantly by her side, day and night; he administered her medicines and food, and laid her down in bed—lifting her in his own arms as if she were a child—or lifted her out again to place her in the reclining armchair where she spent the greater part of her day. He dressed her and undressed her, styled her hair, and adorned her with elegant morning caps that he had procured for her himself. The poor invalid was utterly captivated; she forgot everything he had ever made her suffer,

attributing it all to the intensity of his love. She felt herself falling more deeply in love with him each day; it was solely for his sake that she lamented her fading life. She longed to recover for him, to revel in the intoxication of his presence, and to make him happy just as he desired. Autumn was drawing near, and already, across Romilda's skin—rendered sallow, scaly, and parched by fever—ran the first shivers of the coming winter cold. As he left the room after examining her, the doctor had whispered softly to Raffaele:

"One month more—and no longer."

"One month more—and no longer!" repeated the invalid, her lips pale and trembling. She had overheard the words—for one of the symptoms of consumption is precisely an extraordinary heightening of the senses of hearing and smell—and she wrung her hands in mute despair.

"I'm thirsty!" she murmured moments later, sensing Raffaele's return to the room.

"I'll get it for you right away," the compassionate nurse replied with prompt solicitude, and set about preparing her a glass of lemonade.

Chapter LIV

He was leaning against the table behind Romilda’s back; yet she could still see his features, reflected in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall, a mirror in which she delighted in watching him with an indescribable intensity of affection. Suddenly, her cheeks flushed a vivid crimson, and her eyes flashed. She had seen her husband pour the contents of a small paper packet into a glass: a packet he had drawn from the pocket of his waistcoat, not without agitation and while glancing around suspiciously. Raffaele stepped forward and handed her the lemonade. Romilda stared him straight in the eye. He could not conceal a shudder of terror; but seeing her drain the entire drink in one gulp, he regained his composure.

"Do you love me, Raffaele?" she asked him then, in a faint voice beneath which lay a subtle, razor-sharp edge of irony.

"More than life itself, my angel," the young man replied with fervor, seizing her hands and covering them with kisses.

"And have you always loved me like this?"

"Like this, and like this I shall always love you."

"And when I am no more?"

"Why do you let yourself be seized by such dark thoughts?"

"They are not dark thoughts; they are the intuition of truth! One more month, and then no more!" Romilda repeated sadly, as if speaking only to herself. Raffaele turned as pale as a washed-out rag. Had she heard? Or was it truly a premonition rising from her own soul?

"What on earth are you saying!" he exclaimed; and, encircling her small head with his arms, he drew her close and kissed the golden strands of her fine, delicate hair—hair that escaped from beneath her graceful bonnet, lending her head an air of ineffable sweetness and childlike innocence.

"You could shorten my suffering," Romilda murmured into his ear. Raffaele felt a shiver run through his veins and bones. Yet he told himself that this, that sense of the uncanny he ascribed to the sick woman’s words, was merely an effect of fear.

"I would do it a thousand times over, were it granted to me. I would sacrifice ten years of my life to alleviate your suffering, were it only for a single day."

"I believe it! I believe it," the dying woman replied in a dry voice, summoning the strength to push him away…

The following day, the scene repeated itself in almost identical terms. However, in his haste to pour the poisonous powder (contained in a small paper packet) into the lemonade, Raffaele inadvertently let another packet slip to the floor. Romilda noticed this, and as soon as she had sent him out of the room—under the pretext that she wished to rest—she summoned a supreme effort of will; staggering and steadying herself against the furniture, she managed to rise, retrieve the mysterious packet, and conceal it within her bosom. The physician, who had allotted the ailing woman but another month of life, had failed to reckon with the potent aid her malady was receiving from the powder administered by her devoted husband. Two weeks later, on a sad, rainy, and gloomy morning, Romilda, having received the last rites and surrounded by her husband, her relatives, and the doctor, breathed her last; yet, as she exhaled her final breath, she made a gesture of reaching into her bosom, from which she drew forth a small folded paper bearing the following inscription in pencil: "To my notary: to be read immediately after my death." It was presumed to be a codicil to her last will and testament; the notary was summoned at once, and the packet was dispatched to him.

Raffaele still stood beside the deathbed, plunged into the deepest despair, and was declaring to the bystanders his intention to follow his wife into the grave, when the notary appeared, accompanied by an unidentified stranger. The notary entered with a grave and stern demeanor; pointing the widower out to the stranger, he declared in a solemn voice:

"Behold the poisoner. Take him into custody. Justice shall take its full course."

The stranger stepped forward, amidst the universal astonishment and stupefaction, and seized Raffaele by the arm; the husband, at that moment, was paler even than the victim lying upon the bed.

"You are under arrest," the stranger announced.

It was the Chief of Police. The very next day, by order of the judicial authorities, an autopsy was performed on Romilda's body; within her internal organs, traces were found of the insidious poison administered to her by her husband: a substance that corresponded exactly to the sample contained in the small card he had lost, which the ailing woman had subsequently retrieved and enclosed within a packet entrusted to a notary. Attached to this card was a note, written by her in pencil, of the following tenor:

"I am dying, poisoned by my husband, Raffaele Vattani, with a powder identical to that found on the attached card, which slipped inadvertently from his hand while he was pouring a dose of the

poison into a glass of lemonade for me. I saw him with my own eyes as he did it, reflected in the mirror. And so it continued, day after day. Knowing I was already doomed, I allowed the heinous deed to run its course. I denounce him now to the justice of men, so that, by punishing him as he deserves, they may spare him from divine retribution."

Crushed by this revelation, Raffaele Vattani did not even attempt to deny the crime: a deed perpetrated with such cold-blooded calculation solely to rid himself of his wife and marry a mistress he had taken, with whom he was madly in love; for she, like him, was a woman of fervent and ardent passions. An immense crowd gathered in Piazza del Popolo on the morning of September 15th to witness his beheading; for the heinous crime had raised a collective cry of horror throughout Rome, igniting the public temper—and particularly that of the women—with a fierce and burning indignation.

There were well over a thousand people gathered in the vicinity of the prison when we emerged with the execution cart; the constables and soldiers struggled mightily to protect him. Curses and imprecations rose up to the very heavens. Decapitation seemed a punishment far too lenient; the crowd would have preferred to see him beaten to death with a mallet and then drawn and quartered. Nevertheless, he remained cool and undaunted. Upon reaching the scaffold, he stepped down from the cart and, encircled by soldiers, ascended it with a firm stride. The sound of the falling axe was echoed by a scream from the crowd. Human vengeance was thus satisfied.

Chapter LV

And so I come to the event that led Giovanni Binzaglia to the guillotine in Perugia on August 23, 1823. He was a young man of strapping physique, though his face was by no means prepossessing. Right in the center of his face, an enormous nose rose like a promontory; beneath it lay a wide, fleshy mouth, its lips bestially sensual and utterly devoid of facial hair. His natural instincts drove him toward amorous conquests—a field in which he was a most formidable champion—and to these he sacrificed everything. In the household of the Facennis—wealthy bourgeois folk, retired from commerce, in whose employ he served—he found no scope to indulge in his customary passions. Yet he found equally gratifying (and indeed profitable) compensations outside the home, for many women were drawn to him by that permanently displayed "signboard" that was his nose. Signora Facenni, a closed-minded old woman, would certainly never have dreamed that she harbored a veritable "Don Juan of the Anteroom" among her staff.

In any case, however, she had no grounds for complaint against him; he proved himself active and zealous in his duties, and she tolerated his frequent absences; particularly those at night. If she occasionally ventured a reproach, Giovanni would invariably reply:

"My dear Signora, please have patience with me; I am twenty-seven years old."

"I do have patience; yet it seems to me you are of an age to take a wife. Why do you not do so?"

"And who, pray tell, would have me, Signora? I am as poor as Job."

"And yet, with the wages you receive from my husband, you surely could have put something aside."

"I would very much like to do so, but…"

"But...?"

"It simply melts away during the very evenings I spend out of the house."

"Thus you find yourself forever trapped in a vicious circle: you cannot take a wife because you do not save; and you cannot save because you have no wife."

"Precisely so, Signora."

"That’s enough. Start thinking about settling down, because time flies, and by the time you actually want to do it, it might be too late."

This was the usual conclusion to their conversations. Giovanni would walk away, laughing inwardly. In truth, he remained unmarried simply because he was perfectly content without a wife. The Facenni family had a single daughter—lovely as a dream and already magnificently developed, despite being barely sixteen—who was bright, spirited, and quite capricious, having been spoiled by her parents' excessive indulgence. Her name was Elsa, and she possessed the air of a heroine from German legend: long, flowing blonde tresses that, when unbound and allowed to cascade over her shoulders, enveloped her entire figure like a mantle. She also possessed a tall, slender figure; large blue eyes; and a facial profile that was exquisitely delicate and pure. Her skin was fair and fine; the roses of her cheeks glowed with a deep, rosy flush; and her mouth was perfectly formed: within which, framed by the almost incandescent crimson of her lips, lay hidden two rows of pearls: small, white, and nearly translucent. She had received an education that was somewhat eccentric, yet comprehensive. She painted with both taste and skill, rode like an Amazon, and pursued her musical studies with great success. Her piano teacher was a young man—no more than twenty-five years of age—with a dark, pale complexion and eyes that were at times languid, at others flashing with intensity, yet always shadowed by dark circles and seeming to swim in a perpetual wave of sensuous reverie.

He had been introduced into the Facenni household by an elderly professor—the very man who had given Elsa her first musical instruction—and had been highly recommended as a scholar of exceptional intellect and immense promise. His clothes left much to be desired in terms of durability and quality; yet, they revealed in their wearer a certain innate inclination toward elegance, as well as a meticulous dedication to keeping them clean and prolonging their lifespan. His black frock coat—buttoned right up to his chin—his dark trousers (fitting snugly at the ankle), and his equally somber cravat had, at first, merely provoked the mirth of the capricious young girl. But once she heard him play the piano—displaying a mastery of technique and a depth of feeling that was truly unique rather than merely rare—he appeared before her eyes as if transfigured. And from that very first day, their lessons began to grow ever longer and more frequent, to such an extent that Signor Facenni felt it a matter of simple fairness to double his remuneration. Corrado—"the Maestro"—then began to refine his attire; his wardrobe soon became meticulously groomed, tasteful, elegant, and even somewhat refined, a transformation that served only to deepen the affection of his pupil, who soon expressed a desire to move beyond the study of the piano and take up singing as well.

Thus, they alternated between four-hand piano pieces and two-voice concertos—between wordless ballads and romances, arias and duets—through which master and pupil could exchange a

wealth of amorous phrases and intoxicating words, all without ever transgressing the strictest bounds of propriety or the most rigid social conventions.

Chapter LVI

Mrs. Facenni did not have much of a natural aptitude for music. While attending her daughter's lessons, she would soon begin to feel bored and invariably end up falling into a deep slumber. Now, sleeping mothers seem tailor-made for daughters who are studying music, especially under the guidance of a young teacher. Elsa and Corrado often touched hands as they glided across the ivory and ebony keys of the keyboard—inadvertently, of course. Yet whenever their hands met, it seemed as though an electric spark would fly from their fingertips, coursing through their bodies and enveloping them both.

But before long, these fleeting touches of the hand were no longer enough—nor were the brushings of their feet against the pedals. One evening, as Elsa tilted her head slightly to the right—accompanying the music with that charming, graceful motion—Corrado planted a kiss on the left side of her neck. The young girl blushed crimson, right up to the very whites of her eyes; yet she uttered not a word, continuing to accompany the music with that gentle swaying of her head.

"Forgive me, Miss," the teacher murmured into her ear—though, in truth, there was not the slightest need for such an apology—"forgive me."

Elsa stole a sidelong glance at him and smiled, as if to say:

"You silly fool! Why, you've done me a favor!"

Corrado was intoxicated by the moment; yet he lacked the courage to go any further. Meanwhile, the performance of the "piece" continued, accompanied by the sonorous snoring of Mrs. Facenni, who was busy digesting a certain pheasant stuffed with white truffles, a dish she had nearly devoured whole at lunch earlier that day, simply to do justice to her cook's culinary skills. As she maintained that gentle, undulating motion of her head, Elsa's forehead came to rest just beneath the teacher's lips; and he, now emboldened and sure of himself, brushed his lips lightly against it. It was the second kiss—and it would be the last for that evening. The following day, the task at hand was to rehearse a love duet by a talented composer, a piece Elsa intended to perform, once again with the maestro, at her family's upcoming evening reception. Signora Facenni, confident in her daughter's virtue and the musician's discretion, felt she could safely excuse herself; she remarked that rehearsals bored her and would only spoil the duet for her, which she felt would be far more enjoyable and delightful if heard for the very first time on the evening of the reception itself.

Corrado sat at the piano; Elsa stood to his left. The maestro sang and played the accompaniment; the young woman sang as well, devouring the young man with her eyes. The allure of that sensual, aphrodisiac music overwhelmed her; and when Corrado—himself overcome by passion—encircled her waist with one arm, she leaned down toward him, tilted his head back by burying her pale hand in his hair, and kissed him on the lips.

"Do you love me, Signorina?" the maestro asked, his voice trembling with emotion.

"And you ask me that?"

"I know the answer. But it is so sweet to hear it repeated by lips such as yours."

"Very well, yes—I love you. I love you madly; I see the world only through your eyes; I draw breath only for you."

"You are an angel. And yet, this confession—which ought to make me the happiest of men—chills me to the bone with dread."

"Why?"

"Because it can only be a source of anguish—of infinite sorrow."

"You fool! It will be a source of ineffable rapture… provided, of course, that you truly love me as I love you."

"Do you not consider, Signorina, the disparity in our stations?" Corrado asked her, adopting a respectful demeanor and an almost stern expression. The young woman was deeply shaken by this and felt her desire for kisses burn even more ardently. Yet, striving to regain her composure, she replied in a voice barely audible:

"I have been thinking about this for a long time."

"And have you not recognized the impossibility of your ever being mine?"

"No."

"I possess no worldly wealth."

"What does that matter?"

"It is indispensable for living."

"I have some."

"Your parents will never consent to such an unequal union. Perhaps, if fortune favors me, once I have brought my great work to the stage, and have made a name for myself, and am on the path to riches…"

"And how long will that take?"

"How should I know? Perhaps two, three… perhaps ten years."

Elsa shrugged her shoulders abruptly, a clear sign of vexation. But at that moment, a shuffling sound was heard at the door, and master and pupil resumed their rehearsal. It was high time. Signora Facenni was returning, accompanied by her husband.

Chapter LVII

The romantic relationship between the two young people, having begun under such happy auspices, progressed rapidly; yet it never crossed the boundaries of propriety and honor. Corrado could have had the girl completely at his mercy, had he only wished to do so. But his passion was not uncoupled from deep and eminently practical calculations. Elsa was graceful, passionate, and dear to him; yet her dowry—and the prospects it held for the future—were not without their own great allure. To possess her would have afforded him a delightful, albeit fleeting, satisfaction. To take her as his wife, however, would have secured—along with her fortune—a happiness that would endure forever. A millionaire heiress (even one who had indulged in a few whims) would certainly not lack for suitors seeking her hand. He had to be wary of her impulsive surges of emotion; he had to exercise restraint; he had to maneuver her to the point where she would desire him as a husband at any cost. Her parents loved her, and they were wealthy enough to ensure a blissful existence for them both: a life of lavish, aristocratic luxury.

Corrado's reserve increasingly irritated the young woman. A thousand times she had thrown herself into his arms, and a thousand times he had gently, yet resolutely, held her at bay.

"I adore you as a saint," he would often tell her, "and for nothing in the world would I ever fail to show you the respect you deserve."

What a horrible nuisance men's respect is for a young woman! Elsa would say to herself; then, aloud, she would add: "I wish you would love me a little less like a saint, and a little more like a woman."

Corrado offered no reply.

One day, at last, the pupil asked her teacher: "Why don't you ask my father for my hand in marriage?"

"Because I have no desire to be forced to make a sudden exit through the window."

"Perhaps you aren't wrong... My father places great value on money, for he says he earned it by the sweat of his brow. But, if you truly love me, it is a risk we must take."

"Why don't you speak to him about it yourself?"

"For that very same reason."

"Turn to your mother, then."

"Mother carries very little weight!"

"It seems she holds you in great affection."

"I do not deny it, but…"

"At the very least, she can sound out your father's mood and prepare him for the request."

"Perhaps you aren't wrong... I will speak to her about it this very evening."

And she did exactly as she said.

That very evening, no sooner had the dinner table been cleared, and Mr. Facenni had retired, when Elsa cornered her mother with a blunt, sudden question:

"What do you think of the maestro, Mother?"

"I think he's quite a clever young man."

"That's not what I'm asking you."

"Then explain yourself better."

"What is your impression of him? As a man."

"He is a handsome young man."

"Isn't he? It would be a stroke of luck for any woman to take him as a husband."

"Provided he could put food on the table."

"He surely won't lack for a position; he has such talent. His opera is bound to be a marvel. Once it's staged, it will bring him instant fame overnight."

"Unless it earns him nothing but a shower of hurled broccoli stalks."

"Mother, are you mocking me?"

"Mocking *you*? Why on earth would I do that, my child?"

"Because I love him! I adore him! I want to marry him! I *will* be his wife—or else I'll go and shut myself away in a convent!"

"I knew it!" exclaimed Mrs. Facenni, heaving a deep sigh. "Tomorrow, I'm taking you to Father Agostino for confession. He'll know how to drive these silly notions out of your head."

"I want him! I want him! And no Father Agostino is going to stop me! I want him!" the girl cried, stamping her foot. "And if you don't let me have him, I'll kill myself!"

This cruel threat terrified the poor lady.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed. "Are you punishing me for some sin? This matter is far more serious than I thought."

"Well, then?"

"What do you want me to say, my dear Elsa? You must speak to your father about it yourself."

"No, *you* have to do it."

"Oh, honestly! He won't even let me finish speaking. I know him all too well. He adores you, of course. But he has his own grandiose notions; he wants to make you a princess, or a duchess, or at the very least, a marchioness. On this point, he will never compromise."

"It is not wealth that constitutes the happiness of a married couple."

"I have heard that said as well; but I put little faith in it. Besides, this is not a question of wealth. Had you fallen in love with a nobleman—as destitute as Job, perhaps, but of a great house—you could be certain of obtaining his consent. Your father has ambitions."

"If I am not to become a countess, then I shall become the wife of a celebrated master: someone like Rossini, or Mozart."

"That is not a morsel he would care to chew."

"In short, Mother: if you love me, if you wish for me to live, then move heaven and earth to persuade him!"

"I shall try; though I hold out little hope."

Chapter LVIII

The result of the mission Mrs. Facenni had undertaken was that her husband flew into a rage; he treated her like a procuress—or worse—dismissed the tutor, and ordered Giovanni to throw him down the stairs should he ever dare to show his face again. That order came as a revelation to Binzaglia. He had already noticed Corrado's assiduous attentions and Elsa's deference toward him, but he hadn't attached much significance to them. In that moment, however, all the little intimacies he had caught between the two came flooding back to his mind; he became convinced that their relationship could not have been entirely innocent, and he ascribed to it a significance far greater than the reality.

And his erotic imagination was so inflamed that he conceived a fierce hatred for the tutor. He felt as though he had been cheated by him. If there was any forbidden fruit to be enjoyed in that house, it ought to have been reserved for him. He resolved, therefore, to maintain the strictest vigilance and to seize the opportunity—the moment it presented itself—to exact his revenge.

"A tasty morsel like that, falling right into the mouth of that lanky scarecrow!" he would mutter, consumed by a paroxysm of bitter resentment. "Oh, he'll pay for this!"

As soon as Elsa was informed by her mother of the disastrous outcome of her mission, and of the tutor's dismissal, she did not waste time in lamentations or futile outbursts; instead, she resolved to achieve her desires by any means necessary. Her outward composure deceived her parents, who assumed she was far more reasonable than they had dared to hope.

Elsa soon found a way to establish a correspondence with Corrado, utilizing an elderly maidservant whom she had transformed into a messenger of love. But Giovanni was keeping watch, and he was soon apprised of everything.

"You're wearing yourself out," he remarked to the old woman one day, as she went about delivering the young lady's letters to the tutor.

"And what would *you* know about it?" she retorted.

"I know quite enough; and since you truly pity, I myself will take charge of this task—out of pure love for my neighbor—leaving the proceeds entirely to you."

The old woman could have asked for nothing better, and with great magnanimity, she consented to the servant's proposal. In this way, Binzaglia came to know the lovers' plans down to the last detail, for before delivering their letters, he made it his duty to read them. Elsa had proposed that Corrado

abduct her; she would bring along her jewelry and a thousand or so scudi she had saved from her personal allowance. This would suffice to support them—and comfortably, too—until her father's anger had cooled and their marriage—now rendered indispensable to atone for the indiscretion they had committed—was finally sanctioned. At first, the master appeared reluctant; yet, in the end, he acceded to the plan. Taking advantage of the boundless freedom she enjoyed within the household, Elsa completed all her preparations. She sent her lover her jewelry, the money, and her entire wardrobe of linens and clothing.

And finally, the day of their elopement was set.

It was to take place at dawn. Elsa was to slip out of the palace through a small service door, for which she had already procured the key. Corrado was to await her a short distance away with a post-chaise that would carry them off to Florence. On the eve of their departure, having embraced and kissed her parents with even greater affection than usual, she retired to her room to await the dawn, consumed by an indescribable anxiety.

Chapter LIX

Elsa had retired to her bedroom: a little dove's nest where simplicity and elegance blended in perfect harmony. At the far end stood a small bed, fitting for a young maidenm draped in lace hangings and surmounted by outer curtains of the palest pink—almost white—silk, perfectly matching the draperies at the door and window. A seventeenth-century dressing table, likewise draped in white, held a set of chased silver and Pompadour porcelain. A small writing desk of inlaid rosewood, accented with mother-of-pearl, stood nearby. A large, richly carved mirrored wardrobe completed the room's furnishings, along with chairs and armchairs upholstered in velvet and brocade.

Elsa had dismissed her old maidservant; now, wrapped in a dressing gown of the finest, sheerest batiste, she sat at her desk, tracing tiny, spider-like script upon the paper. With these lines, she intended to inform her parents of the reasons compelling her to leave the paternal roof, and to outline her plans for the future. Yet it seemed her words failed to perfectly capture her thoughts; for she had already begun the letter several times, only to tear it into shreds repeatedly once she had reached the halfway mark.

She appeared tormented by ominous forebodings. What if her father—outraged by this flight that shattered all his ambitious dreams—refused to have anything more to do with her? She could, perhaps, rely on her mother's affection; yet her mother lacked a forceful spirit and would never find within herself the courage necessary to defy her husband's commands. And, on the other hand, who could guarantee Corrado's loyalty? Who knew if he—once his initial ardor had cooled, and no longer finding in her the wealthy heiress—might not simply abandon her? What would become of her: alone in the world in a foreign land, far from her home and from all the things and people she had learned to love since childhood? Overcome by these fears, she reached for the bell-pull to summon the maid. The old woman appeared in the doorway a few moments later, already half-asleep and clad in a nightdress that was almost comical to behold.

"What does the young lady wish?"

"I don't know," she said absently, following the thread of her thoughts.

"Do you need anything? Would you like me to stay and keep you company until it is time to leave?"

This offer brought the girl back to the reality of her situation.

"Do you think I am doing the right thing, or the wrong one, by leaving?" she asked the maid frankly.

"Miss, you have never asked me such a question before now."

"Well?"

"I have done your bidding out of the affection I have felt for you ever since I held you in my arms as a child. Had you asked my advice beforehand, might I not have tried to dissuade you?"

"And now?"

"And now... I cannot say. Things have reached a point where turning back would seem strange. But the very fact that you hesitate, Miss, suggests that you are no longer ruled by that untamed, unyielding passion that drove you to this audacious plan."

"It is true," she murmured. And—almost as if to warm herself, to rekindle the flame of her love—she drew from a desk drawer the latest letters sent to her by her teacher and began to reread them anxiously, forgetting the maid, who stood waiting, not daring either to interrupt her or to leave. Suddenly, Elsa raised her eyes to look at the woman above her; seeing her standing there in that posture—and seized by a sudden shiver—she rose, went over to the old woman, and, embracing her, said:

"What is decided, is decided. You will plead my cause, won't you?"

"Certainly, provided they don't turn me out onto the street."

"Have no fear: I will completely exonerate you. Go on, go to bed now."

The maid did not need to be told twice.

lsa returned to her writing desk and penned a letter to her parents: affectionate, yet at the same time firm and peremptory. She folded it with a steady hand and sealed it; then, taking off her dressing gown, she walked toward the bed to lie down.

Chapter LX

A whim—all too natural in a woman, and indeed in a young girl about to part ways with her family to throw herself into her lover's arms—made her retrace her steps. Taking the lamp in one hand, she placed it before the mirror to admire her own reflected image. She was truly graceful and captivating, her elegant figure clad in the sheerest cambric of her chemise, which enveloped her like white foam, delineating her magnificent curves: her beautiful arms bare, her towering bosom bare—its coral tips upturned—along with the ample curves of her powerful hips and her slender, sinewy legs, like those of a racehorse; and her head was encircled by a golden halo of hair that cascaded in rich ringlets over her shoulders.

A smile of self-satisfaction blossomed upon her sweet lips... from which, at that very moment, escaped a small cry as she saw the figure of a man take shape in the background of the scene, also reflected in the mirror. It was a cry of surprise and anguish combined, barely stifled by the fear of waking her relatives. Elsa spun around swiftly, crossing her arms over her chest to conceal her treasures, and saw standing before her the servant, Giovanni Binzaglia.

"You, Giovanni?" she asked in astonishment.

"It is I, miss."

"What do you want at this hour, in this place? Who gave you permission to enter?"

"Have patience for a moment, miss, and I shall answer all your questions."

"Have patience? Are you drunk, perhaps? I will call for help, and you will be dismissed on the spot!"

As she spoke, Elsa reached out her hand toward the bell-pull, making as if to grasp it. Giovanni did not move. "I must point out, Miss, that by calling for help, you will merely cause a pointless scandal, one that will certainly be far more damaging to you than to me."

"You insolent wretch!"

"And what is worse," the servant continued, undeterred, "you will ruin a plan of escape that has been so meticulously devised and prepared."

"An escape?" asked Elsa, utterly astounded.

"That poor tutor, who will be waiting for you at daybreak with the post-chaise to whisk you away to Florence, would be absolutely devastated."

"Might one ask who has kept you so well-informed?" the young woman demanded, trembling with rage and indignation.

"I informed myself. I have been keeping a close watch on you for quite some time now; for a very long time, in fact."

"A fine occupation you've chosen! And on whose behalf?"

"On my own behalf."

Elsa let out a sigh of relief; since she was dealing with nothing more than a mere servant, she felt certain the matter could be resolved quickly.

"I hardly imagine you intend to stand in the way of my plans."

"Quite the contrary! In fact, I intend to facilitate them to the very best of my ability, just as I have done up to this point, thereby sparing the old woman the onerous task of delivering your letters and bringing you back those from Signor Corrado."

"So it was *you*, then…"

"I took it upon myself to undertake that arduous task, solely for your sake."

"You are entitled to a reward, and you shall have it. However, you certainly could have chosen a different time—and a different manner—in which to claim it."

"By waiting until the very last moment, I felt I was showing greater delicacy, taking care not to presume upon your indulgence."

"Perhaps you are right," said Elsa, as if answering a thought deep within her own mind; then she quickly added, "The trouble is, having received no prior warning, I have left myself without the funds I otherwise would have had at my disposal."

A diabolical smile flickered across the lips of Giovanni Binzaglia, who then took a step toward the young woman. "But now that I think of it, we can easily set things right," resumed Elsa.

"I could ask for nothing better."

"Take this ring: it is a gift my mother gave me for my birthday. It is worth at least a hundred scudi. Upon my return, you shall give it back to me, and I will pay you that sum. Should I not return, you can always claim it from my mother."

Elsa had slipped the ring from her finger and was holding it out to Giovanni, no longer thinking to use her arms to shield the nakedness of her bosom. Her hand brushed against the servant's, a hand that burned like a glowing ember. The girl recoiled, more astonished than ever; raising her eyes to look at him, she was seized by a shudder of terror.

Binzaglia was no longer a man, but a human beast in the throats of erotic frenzy.

"It is not the ring, nor the money, that I want, Miss."

"What, then?" Elsa murmured, aghast, feeling herself devoured by the young man's gaze.

"It is an hour of your love; an hour of those ecstasies you lavished upon the Master—ecstases he still awaits, and which he shall soon reclaim." And as he spoke, the monster seized her in his powerful arms, crushing her against his chest and covering her with kisses.

"Let me go, you villain!" the girl subbed. "Let me go, you wretch!"

But her voice caught in her throat, and she felt her every ounce of strength to resist draining away. With a supreme effort, she attempted to break free; failing to do so, she swooned, thus falling easy prey to the lust of that brute who, having carried her to the bed, subjected her to a horrific violation.

The rosy mists of dawn were beginning to spread across the horizon; as their gentle light streamed through the window of Elsa's room, tracing the outlines of the objects within, she regained her senses. The events of that terrible night rose in her mind like a dream. Yet the grim reality stood right beside her, embodied in the figure of her seducer who, assuming her anger had now subsided, attempted to kiss her once more and said:

"It is time to go, isn't it, little one?" That voice, which Binzaglia tries in vain to render tender and insinuating, finally shattered the nerves of the wretched girl; summoning all her energy, she thrust him away, her voice choked with indignation:

"Monster! You shall pay the price for your crime."

And she reached out to grasp the bell-pull cord. Giovanni seized her hand just in time. Elsa then attempted to cry out for help, and the servant was forced to clamp his hand over her mouth to stifle her screams. But he soon realized he would not succeed in subduing her, for she struggled desperately beneath his grip. Only one means of escape now remained for Binzaglia: to kill her. And to this end, he instantly turned his mind.

"Silence, or die."

"Kill me, you murderer, you coward!" Elsa tried to cry out—or rather, willed herself to cry out, her voice muffled by Binzaglia's hand.

He snatched up the pillows, pressed them over her face, and, kneeling upon her chest, barbarically strangled her.

Having assured himself of her death by listening to her heart, now silent and still, he lifted her up, looped the rose-colored silk cord from the window drapery around her neck, and thus hung her body. He then placed an overturned chair beneath her feet to create the illusion that she had taken her own life, and quietly slipped out of the room, carefully closing the door behind him. At daybreak, the old maidservant entered—as was her custom—to dispel any suspicion of complicity on her part in her young mistress's supposed flight. But at the horrific sight that met her eyes, she recoiled in terror and let out a piercing shriek.

The household staff, her father, and her mother all came rushing in. Messengers were sent for the doctor and the authorities. The body was cut down and laid upon the bed; however, the physician could do no more than confirm Elsa's death, which had occurred several hours earlier. Meanwhile, an investigation was conducted, leading to the discovery of the letter the young girl had written to her parents. When questioned, the trembling old woman recounted every detail, making no secret of the fact that the deed had been carried out by Giovanni Binzaglia, who was immediately placed under arrest.

The autopsy confirmed the violent abuse the girl had suffered, violence that must have taken place that very night. A belt found at the foot of the bed—identified as belonging to Binzaglia—significantly worsened his legal position. The ensuing judicial inquiry reconstructed the terrible tragedy; the defendant's obstinate denials proved entirely futile, and he was ultimately forced to yield and confess the details of the crime. Giovanni Binzaglia attempted to mitigate his culpability by describing the love the young mistress had inspired in him, and the jealousy sparked by her planned elopement with the tutor. He claimed he had entered Elsa's room to speak with her, that the sight of the half-undressed girl had robbed him of his reason, and that he had been compelled to kill her in order to conceal the heinous act committed in a moment of erotic frenzy.

Chapter LXI

On July 19, 1825, in Ancona, I beheaded Casimiro Rainoni, who, in a fit of bestial fury, had killed his apprentice with a kick to the vital organs. And after four months of respite, at the Piazza del Popolo, I beheaded Leonida Montanari and Angiolo Targhini—two conspirators against His Holiness's government, members of the Carbonari sect—who had gravely wounded a comrade of theirs, a certain Spontini, on the suspicion that he had betrayed them and denounced them to the authorities.

This execution was the subject of much discussion in Rome, for the shadowy association to which they belonged struck terror into the population of Rome: an honest, God-fearing people, loyal to the Pope. Yet, although there were whispers of riots and insurrections being plotted by their brethren to rescue them from the gallows, the public peace—thanks to the wise and vigorous measures adopted by the government—was not in the slightest disturbed. Here is how the events unfolded: A member—a certain Angiolo Targhini, a native Roman—was entrusted with the operation. He was a man of the people, possessed of a resolute spirit and a steady hand.

One evening, Targhini passed by the Peretti pharmacy; spotting Spontini standing in the doorway, he invited him to follow him, claiming he needed to speak with him regarding a matter of grave importance. Spontini assented and followed him. They turned into the Vicolo di Sant'Andrea, a dark and deserted alleyway. Targhini glanced around for a moment and, seeing no one, drew a dagger from the inner breast pocket of his coat and plunged it into Spontini's chest, directly over the heart. Spontini collapsed, and Targhini made his escape with rapid strides, accompanied by another man who had been waiting for him. Spontini was not dead.

He cried out for help; Two Pontifical Carabiniers, who were patrolling nearby, rushed toward him and found him sitting on the ground, his head resting against the small column beneath the shrine of the Madonna—which was illuminated by a lamp—located at the corner of the palace. Upon examining him, they discovered he was wounded; they then proceeded to the Peretti pharmacy to inquire if a doctor was present to assist the unfortunate victim and determine whether he was fit for transport. The surgeon Leonida Montanari, from Cesena, stepped forward, and together they headed toward the wounded man, who remained in the exact same spot. Montanari took out his surgical kit, selected a probe, and began to examine the wound; he determined it was not mortal. However, one of the Carabiniers, who had been observing Montanari closely, noticed that he was attempting to use the

probe to deepen the wound. He gave him no time to succeed; he snatched the probe away and clamped a sturdy pair of handcuffs onto his wrists. Then, having called for reinforcements, they escorted Leonida Montanari to the prison, while Spontini was taken to the Hospital of the Consolazione, where his wound was successfully treated. Legal proceedings were initiated against Targhini—whose name the wounded man had revealed while identifying him as his attacker, leading to his immediate arrest—and against Montanari, who had attempted to finish the deed. Although they offered the most brazen denials, both men were sentenced to decapitation by the Sacred Consulta.

It was feared that, during the execution, other sectarians might attempt some audacious strike; consequently, all appropriate security measures were put in place. As for myself—despite having received a multitude of anonymous letters threatening me with death should I carry out the execution—I performed my duty without hesitation. It was an imposing spectacle. Piazza del Popolo was teeming with people, a crowd unlike any I had ever seen there before. When we arrived with the cart, the soldiers struggled to clear a path for us to pass. Upon reaching the foot of the scaffold—which I had erected during the night with the assistance of my aide—Targhini first, and then Montanari, stepped down with the utmost composure; surrounded by the spiritual comforters, they ascended the steps, practically skipping. All attempts to induce them to repent and confess proved futile. "We have no account to render to anyone; our God resides deep within our own conscience," they replied invariably.

I had received orders from Monsignor Fiscale to make haste—as, I believe, had the comforters. Thus, no further time was wasted. I bound their wrists securely—for they had refused to allow themselves to be blindfolded—then I stepped Angelo Targhini forward; smiling, he offered his head to the guillotine, and in an instant, he was dispatched. Leonida Montanari bade me a mocking farewell, saying, "Goodbye, colleague," then followed Targhini’s example… and, just as I had done with Targhini, I dispatched him to his Creator. A sudden stir ran through the crowd; it seemed as though applause were about to erupt. Yet the sight of the armed guard held them in check, and not the slightest incident occurred that required regret.

Chapter LXII

Four months and ten days later—that is, on September 16th—I carried out another beheading in Piazza del Popolo, the victim being Giuseppe, son of the late Biagio Macchia, a butcher who had bludgeoned his wife to death. I say "bludgeoned," for the instrument he employed to kill her bore a precise resemblance to the *mazzola*—the heavy mallet used in the execution method known as *mazzolatura*. On this subject, I can offer my opinion with a certain degree of expertise.

Macchia had married a strikingly beautiful woman from Loreto, whose voluptuous, rounded figure drew the attention of every young man in the Monti district, where he kept his shop. Yet no one had managed to obtain any favors from her, and her reputation as a virtuous woman was firmly established. Having conceived almost immediately after the wedding, she gave birth ten months later to a baby girl, who died almost at once. The midwife then suggested she take a position as a wet nurse in a princely household, offering her a most handsome remuneration. Rosa—the butcher's wife—spoke to her husband about it. At first, he hesitated, but eventually, he succumbed to the allure of the money. His business at the shop was not going particularly well; he had debts, the interest on which was devouring the greater part of his earnings. The prospect of being able to pay them off—and thus be relieved of that burden—persuaded him to make the sacrifice, and he allowed his wife to enter the prince's household to nurse the little prince.

Rosa was immediately outfitted in a lavish version of her native regional costume. They fashioned for her a magnificent gown of sky-blue cashmere, featuring a broad band of golden-yellow satin along the hem cut short enough to leave her feet exposed well above the ankles. Her feet were clad in low-cut shoes of polished leather, adorned with silk bows matching the color of the satin band; she also wore a bodice of sky-blue silk—matching the gown—trimmed with ribbons and ornamentation of yellow silk. A chemisette with wide, puffed sleeves of white cashmere, and a small shawl of Indian crepe (also yellow) which cast glimmers of golden light upon her alabaster neck, left daringly bare both front and back; they adorned her graceful head with a broad braided ribbon of sky-blue silk, edged with gold fringe, held in place by a large filigree pin, likewise of gold.

Seeing her in this attire for the first time, poor Macchia was seized by a sudden dizziness: never had his bride appeared so beautiful to him, and never had he desired to possess her more ardently. Yet this was impossible for him, for it had been stipulated by contract that Rosa was never to leave the

princely palace during the entire period of nursing. Giuseppe could speak with his wife only in the presence of the maid and the governess.

The butcher was consumed with anguish over it. And as if his inner torment were not enough, he had to endure the taunts of friends and acquaintances, those who sought to avenge themselves for Rosa's aloofness toward them by stoking the fires of her husband's jealousy.

"Eh, Beppe! How long has it been since you last embraced your wife?" one of them would ask.

Another would chime in: "Do they at least let you see her?"

A third would add: "Does the Prince need nursing, too? They say he's always hovering around her. And after all, you can't blame him. She was the finest cut of meat you had in the shop." Macchia would parry their jests as best he could, but deep down he seethed with rage, cursing the very hour and moment he had allowed himself to be overcome by his greed for money.

Finally, he made up his mind. He went to Rosa and told her, plain and simple, that he intended for her to return home and to the shop.

"Are you mad?" was Rosa's reply.

"Mad or not, that is what I want. Get dressed, and let's go."

A furious quarrel ensued. But Macchia had already given his consent for the wet-nursing arrangement; Rosa claimed she was perfectly happy staying in the Prince's household; and so, the butcher was unceremoniously thrown out of the palace by the servants. Macchia appealed to Monsignor Fiscale, but Monsignor Fiscale threatened to have him thrown in jail if he dared to go and disturb his wife again. Whether by force or by choice, Beppe had no option but to keep his mouth shut, gnawing at the very chain he had forged for himself when he gave his consent in the first place. Yet he continued to seethe with schemes for revenge. He held a grudge against the whole world: against his wife, the Prince, the servants, Fiscale… and, I suspect, even the Pope himself. One day, as he was closing up the shop, a beardless young man appeared before him: one who had all the air of a servant from a noble household.

"Signor Beppe?" the young man asked timidly.

"That's me. What do you want?"

"I am a stable hand for the Prince—the very household where your wife is currently serving as a wet nurse."

"Ah! So you are. Just you wait, I'll give you a proper dressing-down!" the butcher roared, rushing into a corner to grab the heavy wooden beam he usually used to bar the shop's back door.

"What are you doing?" the servant asked, aghast.

"Nothing much—I just want to give your shoulders a little 'caress.' And if only I could do the same to your master!"

"You'd be better off 'caressing' the shoulders of the one who's cuckolding you!" the young man shrieked, leaping out of the shop in a single bound and coming to a halt in the middle of the street. Macchia had turned livid; his liver was churning out such bile that it seemed poised to choke him. Yet, he managed to master himself: he set down his pole and called out to the young man:

"Hey there! Young fellow, do me a favor and hear me out. I get worked up, and I let myself get carried away. I'm closing up now; if you like, we can go have a little drink together over at Zi' Pippo's."

"Thank goodness! You've finally come to your senses. I come here to do you a good turn, and you nearly beat me to death."

"Don't you know that a man in a rage turns into a beast?"

"I certainly noticed."

Giuseppe Macchia gave the shop door a good, solid lock, then—hooking his arm through the young man's—he dragged him off to Zi' Pippo's.

Chapter LXIII

The manservant and the butcher had huddled together at a small table, slowly emptying a jug of Frascati wine intended to loosen their tongues. Yet neither dared broach the subject: the latter longed—and at the same time feared—to learn the truth; the former was afraid that Beppe might fly into a rage once again.

"We've been sitting here for a quarter of an hour," Macchia finally said in a hushed, barely audible voice, "and we still haven't gotten down to business. Would you mind explaining it to me...?"

"With all my heart—provided you promise to act like a man and not give in to the outbursts of your temper."

"Rest assured, my friend. By now, I am prepared for anything. You are doing me a service, and I am not the sort of man to be ungrateful. So, my wife…"

"She is betraying you."

"Are you certain? Because—mind you—I wouldn't want…"

"I am as certain of it as I am of having received holy baptism. I saw it with my own eyes."

"The shameless hussy! Where?"

"In the stables. In the coachman's room."

"So it isn't the Prince, then?"

"The Prince? Nonsense! She's madly in love with the coachman."

"The slut!"

"Every evening, at the hour the servants sit down to eat, she leaves the baby alone in his cradle—certain that no one will come looking for her—descends in the dark, and makes her way to the stables, where her lover awaits her."

"And how long does she stay there?"

"Half an hour—three-quarters at most."

"How did you find out?"

"The coachman ordered me to clear out during that hour; I replied that I had some business of my own to attend to, and he told me: 'If I catch you in the stables at that time, I'll send you straight to hell.' I didn't need to be told twice. But wanting to find out what was going on, one evening I hid

myself in the manger of two horses—which have since been sent out to the country—and I saw everything. That was when I decided to warn you."

"And a good thing you did, by God! Let's have another tankard." The tankard was ordered, and as it flowed from the vessel down the throats of the two new friends, Beppe began to speak:

"Services aren't sold by the half-measure."

"I am entirely at your disposal—provided you don't compromise me."

"Have no fear."

"What is it you want from me?"

"I want you to let me into the stable without anyone else seeing me; I'll take up the same observation post you used. I want to see it with my own eyes."

"You aren't planning on hurting Rosa, are you?"

"Not in your wildest dreams. I only want to expose her. Then I'll send her to the devil."

"So be it. Come at dusk. The main gate is open; at that hour, the gatekeeper is usually off having a chat with his friends. Walk right in and head for the stable—it's in the second courtyard on the right. I'll be there."

Shortly thereafter, the manservant and the butcher parted ways. The former returned to the palace, delighted to have found a means to exact revenge upon the coachman, with whom he had a mortal feud; the latter returned to his shop and made all the necessary arrangements for the plan he intended to execute. At the appointed hour, Macchia presented himself at the stable, where the stable-hand was waiting for him; the latter was somewhat surprised to see him armed with the very pole with which he had threatened him that morning, but Beppe reassured him, explaining that he always made a habit of carrying it with him at night, as he was beset by many enemies. The manservant pointed out the manger in which he was to hide, urged him to exercise the utmost caution, and then departed for fear of being discovered. They arranged to meet again that very evening at Zi' Pippo's tavern.

No sooner had the stable-hand departed than Macchia crouched down inside the manger and waited. The stable was illuminated by a lamp suspended from the vaulted ceiling in the center, fitted with a large reflector shade that cast its light over the section where the horses were stabled. The spot where the butcher lay concealed, however, remained immersed in the deepest darkness. Macchia did not have long to wait. The door opened slowly, and the coachman entered, carrying one of those small bull's-eye lanterns that project a focused beam of light directly ahead while leaving the doorway itself shrouded in shadow. He cast a cursory glance at the horses, then ascended the few steps leading to the

watchman's cubicle and entered, leaving the door ajar behind him. Five minutes elapsed—minutes that, to the cuckolded husband, felt like five centuries—when suddenly a faint creaking sound was heard at the door, and Rosa appeared, clad in her provocative attire, cut even lower than usual. No sooner had she set foot on the first step than the dressing-room door sprang open, and the voluptuous woman was fully engulfed by the light from the bull's-eye lantern. Unable to restrain himself any longer, Giuseppe Macchia leaped from his hiding place, armed with his pole, and dealt a terrible blow to the wet nurse's head. Rosa fell, letting out a piercing scream, and lay motionless. Meanwhile, the cuckolded man lunged into the coachman's dressing room, but the latter had already thrown himself out the window into the courtyard, a drop of only a few meters. The scream drew the servants, the porter, and other household staff to the stable, where they found the wet nurse with her skull crushed, hovering between life and death. In the meantime, others apprehended the butcher, who—following the coachman's example—had also jumped from the window into the courtyard. It is needless to describe the ensuing uproar within the palace. Giuseppe Macchia was handed over to the guards who had rushed to the scene and was taken to prison; Rosa was transported to the mortuary of the nearby church after a physician had officially pronounced her dead.

During his interrogation before the judges, the butcher confessed to the crime and revealed his motive, though he refused to disclose the name of the servant who had apprised him of the affair. However, the informant's identity was quickly surmised, as everyone was well aware of the animosity that existed between him and the coachman. Sentenced to beheading, Giuseppe Macchia himself requested the rites of religion and faced his execution with courage, yet without any ostentation of bravado.

Chapter LXIV

The uxorcide I have just recounted calls to mind another one that occurred in Tolentino a few years later, the fascinating details of which I recall with perfect clarity. Giuseppe Valeri, a traveling haberdasher, had taken as his wife a fetching country girl with a statuesque figure, a mischievous and cunning face, and an incandescent gaze; prior to tying the knot with the haberdasher, she had sown a good many "wild oats", deeds that had significantly swelled the ranks of the infants housed in her village's foundling home.

Ugly as sin—gaunt, lanky, with arms and legs so long that when he spread them he resembled the sails of a windmill—Domenico was closer to forty than thirty-five. Stingy, avaricious, tight-fisted, ill-dressed, and even worse-proportioned, he certainly could not aspire to a prestigious marriage. Yet even the beauty of the young woman upon whom he had set his sights was a prize far beyond his deserts. He was, therefore, necessarily obliged to be extremely accommodating regarding her past—and to resolve to turn a blind eye to the future as well. And that is precisely what he did. His frequent absences from the village were a stroke of good fortune—one upon which Michelina had confidently banked when she agreed to marry him.

The early days of their marriage passed peacefully for both of them. The wife courageously overcame the revulsion her husband's ugliness inspired in her; the husband, for his part—seeking to repay her for the pleasures he derived from her—not only showed her great indulgence but also spent money with a lavish hand. Michelina took full advantage of both circumstances. She dined sumptuously, dressed with a certain degree of luxury, never lifted a finger to do any work whatsoever, and had acquired a veritable crowd of "cousins" to enliven her hours of leisure. Before long, Domenico had earned himself the reputation of being the greatest, most fortunate, and most contented cuckold in all of humanity.

But appetite grows with eating, as the saying goes, and soon the treatment she received from her husband began to seem far too meager to Michelina. She reflected that while her ardent lovers afforded her many physical pleasures, they provided her with absolutely none of a moral nature; thus, she began to turn her libertine lifestyle to her own financial advantage. One evening, returning home earlier than expected from one of his customary business trips, Domenico found his beloved spouse dining with a stout, corpulent parish priest. The table was laden with every bounty God could provide: bottles coated

in the honorable dust of ages, and bulbous-bellied flasks holding liquid topazes and rubies; a magnificent capon steamed upon the sideboard, while other winged, featherless bipeds lay waiting on the dresser. The most delectable aromas permeated the room, tickling the nostrils of the returning haberdasher—even more delightfully, in fact, than they did those of the two diners.

At the sudden appearance of Domenico Valeri, the curate made a move to rise, and his already ruddy cheeks turned the color of flame; but Michelina restrained him with a delightful gesture of her small white hand and an almost imperceptible shrug of her shoulders.

"Good Menico," she said then, "you have returned just in time; the curate will be only too happy to have you as a dining companion."

"Certainly! Certainly!" the priest mumbled, though he feared he would not feel entirely at ease.

"Come here," Michelina resumed; "a wing of this capon will fortify your stomach and whet your appetite for the rest of the meal."

"Do you truly permit this, Father Curate?" Domenico asked with emotion, taking the reverend's hand and kissing it with great respect.

"By all means."

As the supper progressed, the curate shed his sulkiness; and, observing her husband's evident pleasure, she plied him lavishly with food and drink. Meanwhile, she was busily racking her brains for a way to extricate herself from this predicament, one that was completely derailing her plans for the evening. Michelina had laid fresh, laundered sheets—delicately scented with rosemary—upon their marriage bed; she had changed the pillowcases, and it would have been such a perfect opportunity to spend a truly blissful night.

The priest questioned the haberdasher's capricious wife on this delicate subject, using only his eyes and his feet. She grasped his meaning instantly and replied with a sly, knowing smile. But Domenico Valeri was no fool. From that dinner, he grasped everything he could hope for in the future; appearing obliging (and divining the curate's desires and intentions) he let slip an exclamation that sank deep into the innermost recesses of the priest's soul:

"What a pity that I cannot linger longer in such delightful company."

"Why?" the worthy ecclesiastic asked promptly.

"I must leave immediately. I have a contract to conclude, and I came only to collect some funds of which I am in need."

"You shall leave tomorrow morning," said the demure wife; "if you depart like this, the good curate will take offense."

"Indeed!" the priest mumbled.

"The good curate is so kind that he will surely forgive me. Business comes first, does it not?"

"Certainly," the host in the black cassock blurted out.

"At least stay a little while longer—just long enough to walk Don Gaspare home," purred Michelina, who was amusing herself by keeping the priest on tenterhooks.

"Oh! There is no need for that," he retorted.

"In that case, I shall take my leave."

And having drained a final glass of Aleatico, Domenico rose, feigned to fetch something from the chest of drawers, and—having draped his cloak back over his shoulders—he departed, accompanied by his wife's good wishes and admonitions.

Chapter LXV

The relationship with the curate continued just as happily, to the great satisfaction of all three parties involved. From that moment on, Domenico Valeri's household was always stocked with every good thing under the sun, while the "good" husband grew increasingly forgetful about giving Michelina money for household expenses. She, for her part, increased the luxury of her wardrobe and the richness of her jewelry. The priest was wealthy and generous; the woman, ambitious; the husband, greedy.

It could not, therefore, have turned out any other way.

Yet the haberdasher's avarice grew ceaselessly; he took pleasure in admiring the jewels and gold ornaments his wife flaunted, though he secretly longed to claim a large share of them for himself. One evening, returning home after an absence of several days, he found Michelina seated at the dining table, before a spread bearing the remains of the succulent supper she had, as was her custom, shared with the curate. The good priest, however, had already departed, as he was scheduled to officiate at a very early service the following morning.

The haberdasher sat down cheerfully beside Michelina and, after embracing her with all the gallantry he could muster, remarked:

"Let's see what tasty morsels are left. Chicken, ham, Norcia truffles, Civitavecchia pizza[xxix]... well, well indeed—splendid!"

And he began to eat with gusto, eliciting peals of laughter from his wife who, having had a bit too much to drink with the curate, was feeling particularly amorous.

"Drink up, you old fool!" she exclaimed, pouring him some wine. "This is a dry vintage from Grottaferrata—excellent for the digestion. And over there is some Moscato from Gradoli; it tastes just like…"

"Angel piss?"

"You said it yourself, you filthy wretch!" Once Domenico had thoroughly stuffed himself with food and wine, he deemed the moment ripe to have a certain conversation with his modest better half: a conversation he had been mulling over in his head for several days.

"Tell me something, Michelina," he began. "The parish priest is generous, isn't he?"

"Extremely generous."

"Does he ever refuse you anything?"

"I don't even have to ask; he anticipates my desires—he doesn't wait for me to voice them, he preempts them."

"A fine man! A model priest! An excellent pastor! So, if I were to ask him for something, he wouldn't deny it to you?"

"What would I ask him for?"

"How should I know? Some money."

"He’s already given me plenty."

"Oh, really? Roughly how much?"

"Look!"

As she spoke, Michelina rose, went to the chest of drawers, and drew out a small casket fashioned like an antique cabinet, covered in velvet, and adorned with metal ornaments and studs. She reached into the ample folds of her bodice, and, pulling out a small key, unlocked the box.

The haberdasher’s eyes widened in astonishment, and he cried out:

"Why, there must be at least three thousand scudi in here!"

"I should certainly think so."

Meanwhile, Michelina delighted in plunging her white, plump hands into the gold coins; she felt a sort of voluptuous thrill at the touch of that precious metal.

Domenico had grown paler than usual. The sight of the gold made him dizzy, and several times within the span of a few seconds, his gaze shifted from the casket to the tip of a knife—the very one used to cut the pizza—which still lay upon the table.

"It is dangerous to keep all this money in the house," he said abruptly.

"Why?"

"Because people might find out—or grow suspicious—and one fine day, or one fine night, come here to slit our throats in our beds just to rob us."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Besides, money sitting in a chest earns nothing; whereas, if invested wisely, it can yield interest."

"No, no!" exclaimed Michelina, who would hear nothing of parting with her treasure.

"There is a fine farm for sale near Macerata."

"What do we know about farming?"

"We could buy it and sublet it."

"No, I prefer to hold onto my money."

"Very well, if you enjoy having money to handle, let's set up a proper merchant's shop: I'll stop traveling to the fairs, and we can live a most comfortable life, the life of respectable bourgeois folk."

"That doesn't appeal to me either. As long as the curate is around, I won't be short of cash; we'll worry about what comes after later."

Valeri tried with other proposals to sway her from her resolve to keep her assets—her "dead capital"—locked away in the chest of drawers. With every fresh insistence, Michelina grew more unyielding, appearing, moreover, annoyed by her husband's talk. He was therefore forced to accept that, for the moment, there was nothing to be done; he suggested they retire for the night, and Michelina consented.

The bed was, as usual whenever the curate dined at his mistress's house, prepared with great care: fitted with the finest, cleanest linens and thoroughly fluffed. The woman, sated with sensual pleasure, climbed in, followed by Domenico, though he was too agitated to think of attending to his wife's physical needs. She, after waiting in vain for at least a single caress, soon fell into a deep sleep. The haberdasher, however, could not close his eyes; he saw constantly before him the small strongbox and Michelina's hand, ceaselessly sifting through the gold coins.

Long hours passed in this manner. Domenico's head felt like a volcano; his temples throbbed, and his mouth and throat were parched with thirst; he seemed in the throes of a violent fever. Yet, through sheer force of will, he managed to master himself, regain a measure of composure, and bring his thoughts into order.

"By gentle means," he thought, "I'll never get anything out of this harlot. She'll just go on bleeding the priest dry and hoarding the money. But who's to say the day won't come when, seized by an overpowering passion for some young scoundrel, she lets him squander it all? Who's to say that once she's built up enough capital to live in comfortable luxury, she won't tell me to go to hell and simply go off to live on her own?" So I would have to endure both the loss and the mockery? No: she must be eliminated. She possesses a fortune of three thousand scudi; her jewels alone are worth at least another thousand. With such a sum, a man living alone could live without toil, and live well. To wait any longer would be sheer madness.

Having embarked upon this train of thought, the haberdasher did not stop there. He devised a battle plan: confused at first, perhaps, but one that gradually took shape, refining itself through reflection down to the most minute details.

Chapter LXVI

At daybreak, the wife awoke; her head felt heavy and aching from the fumes of alcohol. She mentioned this to her husband, who suggested they get up and go for a walk in the mountains. The fresh morning air, he reasoned, would do her good. He knew of a little hole-in-the-wall where excellent wine was sold, and where they could grab a bite to eat. Michelina agreed with great enthusiasm; she sprang from the covers and dressed in a frantic rush. Domenico did likewise, and half an hour later, while Tolentino was still deep in slumber and not a living soul was to be seen on the streets, the couple left the city and set out across the countryside toward a mountain path.

As they ascended, the path grew ever steeper and more rugged, the terrain thick with trees, shrubs, and tangled vines. Finally emerging from the thicket, they saw a magnificent panorama unfold before them. The sun, now high in the sky, gilded a succession of hills sloping down toward the plain on one side. Beneath their feet lay a deep, black ravine; behind them rose the steep, precipitous slope.

"Look," Domenico said to his wife, "what a beautiful view."

"Stunning!" exclaimed Michelina, genuinely awestruck.

At that very instant, she felt herself seized around the waist. She assumed it was a sudden surge of passion from her husband and yielded to him willingly, albeit surprised by this uncharacteristic gesture.

The haberdasher, with a prodigious effort, hoisted her into his arms and hurled her down into the ravine. Two simultaneous screams rang out: and then, silence. The woman’s beautiful body lay exposed, her garments having bunched up during her fall; as she tumbled headlong from crag to crag and from thicket to thicket, she became stained with blood, until at last she lay lifeless and mangled at the bottom of the ravine.

"That’s done," murmured the peddler calmly, for he had wanted to witness the outcome of his deed. Then, retracing his steps, he headed for home, thinking with delight of the pleasure he would soon experience as he, too, plunged his hands into the gold within the small chest, the very chest from which he had taken care to wrench the key from his victim’s grasp just as he hurled her into the void.

He had made his calculations with mathematical precision. Michelina was well known for her adventurous lifestyle. No one had ever seen her return in the evening, nor seen her leave in the morning. He could feign total ignorance of what had occurred while, in the meantime, securing his

valuables. Perhaps they would arrest him; yet, finding neither evidence nor witnesses against him, they would be forced to release him, declaring him innocent and attributing the crime to some jealous, vengeful lover.

Acting upon these calculations, he returned to his home, took possession of the precious chest, locked inside it the jewels his wife had left in the dresser, and—having wrapped it up just like the bundles of merchandise he was accustomed to carrying from one village to another—he locked his front door and stepped outside. As he reached the street, he saw a figure approaching him: a sight that made him shudder. It was the bailiff, who was immediately joined by two gendarmes; they handcuffed the peddler and hauled him off to prison, bundle and all. He had believed he had committed his crime without witnesses; instead, he had been spotted by a young peasant who had hastened to alert the police. Domenico Valeri attempted to employ the defense strategy he had devised in advance. However, standing against him were the peasant's testimony and the body of the victim. Skillfully interrogated by the judge, he eventually confessed, citing his wife's infidelity as the motive for the crime—believing, by doing so, that he might save his head. But his plan failed.

Sentenced to death after six months of imprisonment, on February 15, 1830, I was called upon to carry out the sentence. Although attended by the comforts of religion, he died a coward, dragged by sheer force onto the fatal scaffold by myself and my assistant.

Chapter XLVII

The revolutionary movements in Naples and Piedmont had also agitated the States of His Holiness, and particularly the Legations. The Carbonari—a fierce political sect bent on overthrowing every throne, including that of the Supreme Pontiff—were constantly hatching conspiracies, aiding one another from province to province, from one end of Italy to the other. To better achieve their objective, they devised a plan to incite an uprising in the Romagna—a region guarded by only a meager number of troops—and to use it as a staging ground for further insurrections; these, they were confident, would inevitably erupt once the rebels had secured an initial victory. The Pontifical government was partially aware of their machinations and remained on high alert; yet, it proved impossible to gather the precise intelligence needed to strike at the ringleaders and instigators, owing to the sect's formidable internal structure, a system that inexorably meted out the death penalty to traitors, whether real or merely suspected.

This ruthless policy had already been demonstrated in Rome during the trial of Leonida Montanari and Angiolo Targhini—men whom I myself had executed at the Piazza del Popolo on November 23, 1825. Three years had elapsed since that event, and the Carboneria—despite having suffered crushing setbacks in Lombardy, Piedmont, and Naples—was growing in scope and strength with each passing day. Even those who were not formally initiated into the sect lent it their aid: whether out of fear of worse consequences, or simply by refraining from reporting the sect's activities whenever they came to their attention. Ravenna was designated as the starting point for this planned revolutionary movement.

At that time, the Most Eminent Cardinal Rivarola—one of the most austere and astute members of the Sacred College—was residing in that very city. The conspirators devised a daring plan: to seize his person and hold him as a hostage, and then to resort to arms to overthrow the Pope's government, replacing it with a revolutionary regime, one to which the other insurgent regions would look as their head, having formed themselves into a league. His Eminence Rivarola was in the habit of taking a daily carriage ride for leisure down to the seashore, skirting the famous Pine Forest and even venturing a short distance into its depths to enjoy the gentle coolness and the exceptionally healthful air: air heavy with the scent of resinous trees, so beneficial to the lungs. At dusk on a day in early May 1828, the Cardinal was returning from his customary outing and was just about to exit the Pine Forest when six

individuals, dressed as huntsmen and armed with muskets, leapt out from one of the densest thickets. Two of them rushed to the horses' flanks, shouting to the coachman:

"Halt, or you are dead!"

The coachman, intimidated, brought the beasts to a standstill, even though the servant seated beside him urged him to spur them on and make for the main road. Simultaneously, the other four approached the carriage doors; the one among them acting as their leader—lifting his hat with one hand while brandishing his rifle with the other—spoke:

"Step out, Your Eminence; we intend you no harm."

"It is useless," replied the Cardinal. "Take whatever we have; do not shed blood needlessly."

"It is not your possessions we are after," the ringleader retorted. "We are not thieves; we are patriots, and we seek only to take possession of your person, whom we shall hold as a hostage." And as the Cardinal appeared to hesitate, they threw open the door and seized him by the arms to drag him out. Meanwhile, the servant had leaped down from the coachman's box and discharged the pistols with which he was armed at the bandits: unfortunately, without striking them. One of the conspirators holding the horses drew a pistol he carried at his belt and, firing it into the servant's head, killed him instantly. The sound of the shots immediately drew a patrol of gendarmes, who were scouring the pine forest, to the scene.

A skirmish involving musket fire immediately ensued; two of the gendarmes fell, gravely wounded. A ball grazed the forehead of the secretary accompanying the Cardinal, while others whistled past His Eminence's ears. Yet the gendarmes soon overpowered the attackers; only two of them—the ringleader and his lieutenant—managed to escape, while the other four were securely bound and transported to Ravenna, following behind the Cardinal's carriage as he returned triumphantly to his palace an hour later. The citizenry was deeply shaken by this heinous attack, and a state of siege was declared. Nevertheless, the remaining conspirators—whom the police had identified as suspects—managed to evade the authorities' dragnet during the night. Legal proceedings for murder and attempted murder were instituted against the four arrested men: Luigi Zanoli, Angiolo Ortolani, Gaetano Montanari, and Gaetano Rambelli. Yet, despite every effort to extract from them the names of their accomplices and the details of the crime, these attempts proved futile. Bound by their oath to the secret society, they obstinately refused to answer the judges' interrogations; neither cajolery nor threats could sway them from their resolve. They treated both with equal disdain, and when all four were condemned to the gallows, they responded in unison:

He who dies for his country has lived long enough.

The execution took place on May 13th in the great square of Ravenna (which was under military occupation) in such a way that no one other than officials of the Curia, soldiers, and penitentiaries could approach the erected gallows. The city's windows, doors, and shops were all shut, and many were draped in mourning. Not a single soul was to be seen in the streets. Ravenna seemed transformed into a necropolis. All attempts made to convert the condemned men had been vigorously rebuffed; they would have nothing to do with confession or religious comforters, and they protested against the escort of two friars, which had been ordered by the Cardinal. The cart traversed the deserted, silent streets, completely surrounded by soldiers—both on foot and on horseback—moving at a brisk trot. Upon reaching the foot of the gallows, the men to be executed stepped down with a steady stride; they ascended the steps of the gibbets one by one with fearless resolve, and—before the noose could tighten around their necks—they cried out in strong voices, devoid of any emotion:

"Long live Italy! Down with the Papacy!"

The execution was swiftly carried out. And that night, I departed with my aide under heavy escort, for a rumor had spread that the Carbonari were out to kill us.

Chapter LXVIII

Geltrude Pellegrini was the pearl of Monteguidone—the pearl and the star combined—for she coupled the most scrupulous virtue with incomparable beauty. She was a magnificent figure, with a physique at once slender and voluptuous; her hair was black, soft, lustrous, and so long that when she let it fall loose over her shoulders, she seemed swathed in a Greek peplos. Her eyes were dark as mulberries, filled with mysterious languor and dazzling iridescence; her profile was a marvel of combined purity and allure. She possessed a mouth of deep crimson, and teeth of dazzling whiteness—separated by slight, delicate gaps—set within lips that were full and sensual; her skin was fine and velvety, of that pale, golden-brown hue that drives painters to despair, for they are utterly unable to capture it. Belonging to a well-to-do family of farmers, she dressed with simple elegance and exquisite taste. When, on feast days, she made her way to church, the very angels would fall in love with her, or so the legend went. And if not the angels, then certainly all the young men, who would line her path—both upon her arrival and her departure—casting glances hot enough to set haystacks ablaze and heaving sighs powerful enough to turn the sails of a windmill.

Geltrude would pass by and smile without any ostentation of exaggerated modesty, yet without a trace of haughtiness either. Everyone loved her—everyone, even the girls her own age—perhaps because they saw no rival in her, given that she had declared a thousand times over that she would never marry, for she had no desire to leave her parents, whom she loved dearly and by whom she was loved just as tenderly in return.

"Geltrude," her elderly mother would often say to her, "it is high time you thought about settling down."

"Don't even speak to me of it! I want to enjoy my freedom," the young woman would reply instantly.

And her father would add: "You silly girl! You say that only because you do not yet know what marriage truly is."

"No other state could be happier for me than the one I now enjoy. I want to stay with my family forever."

"Things could be arranged. Let us find a husband who would be willing to come and live with us."

"No, no! I want no masters; I want no one who has the right to command me, to impose his will upon me—no one, that is, but you."

"But what of the future?" the old woman would insist. "We are not eternal, after all. Sooner or later, the Lord will call us to His side, and you will be left all alone in the world, amidst many dangers."

"Let us not speak of gloomy things, Mother; let me enjoy the joys of today. When tomorrow comes, we shall think about it then."

And so, the discussions on this subject between Geltrude and her parents would always come to a close. It must be noted, however, that the graceful young girl was somewhat romantic in nature: she had received a city-style education: she knew how to embroider, write, do sums, and read. And read she did—a great deal. Her favorite pastime, once she had finished her daily chores, was reading. In the winter, during the evenings, while the family gathered in the dining room and the others chatted or attended to household matters, she would read. Often, she would retire to her bedchamber with a book in hand and continue reading for hours on end. During the warmer seasons, she would wander out into the countryside, venturing deep into the thickets; and once she found a spot where she could be entirely at ease, she would settle down upon the grassy turf—or perhaps upon a moss-covered boulder—and read.

To those friends who chided her for her solitary ways, she would invariably reply that she preferred living in the company of the ideal characters found in her books rather than amidst the people of this world. Occasionally, too, she would bring herself to recount to them the stories from the novels she had devoured; and then she would speak of love—just as a young girl in love might have done—thereby arousing the suspicion that she was harboring some secret little passion. But eventually they were forced to convince themselves that this was not the case, and their astonishment only grew.

Chapter LXIX

As an August day drew to a close, Geltrude, who had spent the entire afternoon in the thicket reading, was making her way home when she heard the rustling of trampled leaves not far away. She turned and found herself face-to-face with a tall, fair-haired young man dressed as a hunter. He wore a suit of green fustian, high leather gaiters, a soft felt hat, and carried his rifle slung across his shoulders.

"Excuse me, fair maiden," the stranger said to her, "I have lost my way in this thicket; would you be so kind as to show me how to get out?"

Geltrude blushed right up to the whites of her eyes, overcome by a newfound emotion. The hunter had pale blue eyes, an engaging voice, and a bearing that was anything but coarse.

"Are you neither from the village nor from the surrounding area?" the young woman ventured to ask him.

"No. I am a Roman, and quite unfamiliar with this region; I was told that game abounds in these woods, so I came here. Unfortunately, my dog went lame after a thorn pierced his paw, and I had to leave him behind at the inn."

"If you head down through the woods about three rifle-shots' distance you will find a cross-path to your left that leads to the main road."

"Many thanks. But you—forgive me—are you not taking the same route?"

"No; I am from Monteguidone, which lies a quarter of an hour from the woods, and I must head uphill to reach it."

"What a pity. I would have so gladly walked the road in your company."

"You would stray too far from your destination, and that would not be wise, as evening is drawing near... The roads are unsafe, especially for strangers."

"It is well worth the trouble to go a little out of one’s way to converse with a lovely young woman—such as yourself—and even to run a certain risk."

At these words, Geltrude felt the flush on her face grow warmer still; wishing to cut the conversation short, she replied:

"Farewell, Mr. Huntsman."

And, quickening her pace, she walked away. Yet she could not resist the temptation to turn back to see if the stranger was following her directions. Instead, he was still standing right there: fixed to the

spot where she had left him with his arms crossed over his chest and his gaze fixed intently upon her. Their eyes met once more. That evening, Geltrude sat down with her book as usual, but she read little, if anything at all; and as soon as she had retired to bed, she extinguished her lamp.

The adventure of the day weighed heavily on her mind; she saw the fair-haired young man before her eyes again, and it seemed as though she could hear his melodious voice. What is more, he did not seem like a stranger to her. She must have encountered him somewhere else: perhaps within the pages of some novel. Geltrude rose the following morning without having slept a wink. Her countenance bore an air of something unusual, something weary and languid.

"Are you feeling unwell, Geltrude?" her mother asked her solicitously.

"Not in the least."

"But you look so pale."

"I slept very little. It was so terribly hot."

"Why don't you go back and rest?"

"No, no. It would be better for me to enjoy a bit of fresh air."

Her mother pressed the matter no further, and Geltrude attended to her household duties as usual, inwardly wishing the afternoon would hasten along so she might go for a walk and read in the woods. She felt a vague premonition that something out of the ordinary awaited her there. Perhaps she was hoping to encounter the huntsman once again.

A young woman’s premonitions always come true, especially when they are inspired by the heart. Upon reaching a spot not far from where she had spent the afternoon the day before, she caught sight of a shadow; it quickly took on substance and precise form: that of the blue-eyed hunter. She paused for a moment, perplexed, but quickly made up her mind and continued on her way; when she stood before the stranger, she was the first to speak.

"Still here, sir? Did you have a good hunt yesterday, then?"

"Not the kind I desired," the stranger replied. "I was waiting for you."

"Waiting for *me*? Yet, by this hour, you surely ought to know the way well."

"Sit down, Geltrude," the stranger said, making room for her on a boulder with the utmost naturalness, as if she were an old acquaintance.

Charmed by his easygoing manner, devoid of any undue affectation, Geltrude accepted the invitation and sat down.

"How do you know my name?"

"I was told in the village."

"So you have been making inquiries about me?"

"Yes… because I love you."

The young woman sprang to her feet: that word, tossed out so abruptly—without any circumlocution—had offended her. Who did this bold hunter think he was dealing with?

"Sit down," the stranger repeated, "and do not take offense. I know that you are a virtuous young woman: that you have never taken a lover, and that you want nothing to do with marriage. By candidly confessing the feelings you have inspired in me, I believe I am merely showing myself to be honest and honorable. Do you fear me?"

"No," Geltrude answered frankly.

"Then take your seat again. I have nothing to say to you that could in any way tarnish your virtue. I love you. Well—what harm is there in that?"

The young woman did not reply; But she allowed herself to be swayed by the hunter's insinuating voice and sat down beside him once again.

"I, too, had resolved never to marry, and I have never loved. You are the first young woman who has made me deviate from my resolve. Perhaps we shall never see each other again. But allow me to lay my heart bare to you."

"Well?" murmured Geltrude, lowering her eyes.

"Would I be so fortunate as to have inspired in you even a shred of affection? It is an indiscreet question, I know, and I give you leave not to answer it, nor any others that might chance to escape my lips. I did not sleep last night; did you?"

"Nor did I," the young woman whispered.

"Your image was constantly before my eyes. No matter how hard I tried, I could not banish it."

"The same happened to me."

"I would be wretched if I were never to see you again, never to speak to you again, never to listen to you again. And you?"

"Perhaps I, too."

"You do not wish to marry because of your parents; I cannot…"

"Why?"

"What good would it do to tell you? Perhaps for a similar reason. But could this mutual exchange of confidences and affections not continue?"

Geltrude lifted her head, which she had kept bowed toward the ground, and looked into the hunter's eyes. It was more than an answer; it was more than a confession. It was an affirmation.

Chapter LXX

The meetings between Geltrude and Enrico—for such was the hunter's name—continued every day and eventually grew ever more intimate. They varied their meeting places, yet each time they ventured deeper into the thicket.

"We are weaving a novel," the young man would say to the girl.

"And that is far better than merely reading one," Geltrude would reply with a smile.

"And shall we never reach the epilogue?"

"Then it would be finished, and we could not begin it anew."

One afternoon, a sudden storm caught them unawares while they were strolling through the thicket. Large drops of rain began to fall, harbingers of a terrible downpour to come. So engrossed were they in conversation that they had not noticed the signs in time; it was their good fortune, however, to find themselves near a natural grotto: one well known to Geltrude, where they could take shelter. Before long, the rain turned into a deluge. A terrible gale was blowing, seeming intent on uprooting every tree in the forest. Lightning bolts followed one another with frightening rapidity, such that there were moments when the woods appeared to be engulfed in flames.

Huddled close together upon a slab of rock detached from the grotto's vaulted ceiling, from which hung stalactites of bizarre yet elegant form, they gazed out at the raging storm without a trace of fear; one might have thought they were merely watching a theatrical performance. And every now and then, they would share their impressions with one another. Geltrude felt herself overcome by a mysterious sensation: one that sent sharp, exquisite shivers coursing through her veins. At times, the golden-bronze hue of her skin took on warmer tones, and her eyes flashed and sparkled like the lightning itself. The air, saturated with electricity, played upon her nerves. Enrico sensed this, yet he made no attempt to take advantage of it. Had he taken that entirely spiritual relationship seriously, and did he wish not to alter its nature—or was he, by prolonging it, merely heightening the physical passion?

When it was God's will, the fury of the storm ceased; the rain slowed, the wind fell silent, and a magnificent rainbow stretched its seven-hued arch across the celestial vault.

"It has passed," said Geltrude, sighing as she reluctantly drew away from the side of the fair-haired hunter. Enrico made no attempt to hold her back; he, too, rose, and together they stepped to the

mouth of the cave. There, a new spectacle unfolded before them. Just outside the cave, a torrent of yellowish, muddy water rushed past: impetuous and roaring, sweeping away tree branches, boulders, and animals in its wake.

It was a full-blown flood. An upstream watercourse, swollen by the rains, had overflowed; cascading down through the woods, it had carved out this makeshift river in the low-lying terrain. To regain the higher ground of the forest—and the road—they would have to cross that torrent; and there was no time to lose, for the waters were rising steadily, and sunset was drawing near.

"We must get out at all costs," said Enrico, not without a trace of anxiety.

"Let’s go," Geltrude replied with a sigh, attempting to step her small foot across the threshold of the cave.

The hunter held her back just in time.

"Are you mad?" he exclaimed. "By now, the water would already be above my knees—and the fury with which it rushes down would surely sweep you away!"

"We can’t spend the night here," the young woman replied cheerfully, oblivious to the danger. "What are we to do?"

"Allow me to carry you across the torrent in my arms." In response, Geltrude, with artless abandon, slipped her left arm around the hunter’s neck and rested her beautiful head against his shoulder. Enrico lifted her as if she were a child and took his first steps into the torrent. But the riverbed was slippery; the current was swift, and the water rose far higher than he had anticipated. Before long, he realized he could not withstand the fury of the stream; he was forced to turn back and set his precious burden down upon the threshold of the cave.

"It’s impossible!" he exclaimed.

Yet, beyond the agitation stirred by their predicament, Enrico felt himself overcome by another, deeper transport. Those soft curves he had cradled in his powerful arms for those few brief moments, Geltrude’s sweet breath mingling with his own, the contact of their hair, had driven him mad with love; he felt himself being swept away…

And Geltrude laughed—she laughed ceaselessly.

"Do you not realize, you reckless girl," he cried, drawing close to her once more and reaching out his arms again, "that we are doomed?"

"What does it matter, if you love me?" the girl replied in the same breathless tone, herself enthralled by the spell of passion. "Is not a single moment of happiness worth a lifetime of dull, tedious existence?"

Enrico swept Geltrude into his arms once more; clutching her desperately to his chest, he kissed her:a long, intense, and utterly intoxicating kiss upon her lips. And in that moment, they were utterly vanquished.

What followed was an orgy of frenzied embraces, a wild abandon to which the two intoxicated lovers surrendered themselves completely; an orgy in which passion reached its absolute zenith. Believing themselves condemned to certain death, they sought to meet their end through an agony of pure delight.

A final ray of the setting sun, filtering through the foliage of the trees, pierced into the grotto to rouse the two lovers from their rapture; simultaneously, they broke free from their last fervent embrace and returned to the threshold of their shelter.

The raging torrent had ceased its furious rush; the waters had receded to a very low level, making it easy for the hunter to cross over and regain the path through the thicket, bearing to safety the maiden whom he had once again gathered into his arms—arms that still trembled.

Chapter LXXI

From that fateful day, Geltrude underwent a transformation. Her customary cheerfulness gave way to a sweet and gentle melancholy. She still cherished the company of her parents as she had in the past, yet she would spend entire days alone in her room. Her absences grew more frequent and prolonged. She had surrendered herself completely to the passion that had swept her away, and her romance with Enrico continued, more ardent than ever. But winter was drawing near. Their trysts in the thicket were becoming impossible—or, at the very least, unjustifiable. Indeed, more than once, as the two lovers talked, they had been forced to broach the thorny subject of separation, yet without ever reaching a conclusion.

"Enrico," the young woman finally said to the hunter, "you told me that you could not contemplate marriage; would you be willing to tell me why—frankly, openly? I have no reproaches to make against you. I gave myself to you without stipulations, without conditions, for such was the will of fate. Speak; I am ready for anything."

"Why torment ourselves?"

"Speak, Enrico. I have the strength to hear the truth and the courage to bear it. Perhaps you are…"

"Do you absolutely insist on knowing?"

"I do."

"Very well, then—yes, I am…"

"Say it."

"I am a married man."

Geltrude bowed her head against her bosom and remained for a few moments lost in thought. Enrico dared not disturb her. When she had reflected at length—and appeared to have reached a decision—she rose and, extending her hand to her lover, said in a steady voice:

"It is over. Farewell, Enrico. Forget me, if you can; I shall never forget you."

The hunter clasped the hand she offered him; he kissed it again and again, bathing it in his tears, yet he uttered not a single word.

And so, they parted ways. Three months later, the inhabitants of Monteguidone were taken by surprise by a piece of momentous news. Geltrude Pellegrini was to wed Toto, a wealthy Roman

shopkeeper in his forties. The nuptials were celebrated with great pomp and solemnity. Twelve village girls, clad in white dresses, escorted her to the altar. The journey from her home to the church was a veritable procession. The windows of the houses lining the cortege's path were festooned with decorations, and fresh flowers rained down upon it; the church bells pealed out in celebration. Crowds of people thronged the route. There was a generous distribution of money and provisions to the poor. A sumptuous banquet was held at the home of the old farmer, and once the tables were cleared, the dancing began. The bride appeared somewhat pale, yet beautiful nonetheless. The groom was radiant with happiness. And from those nuptials, a tradition took root in the village.

Upon completing their honeymoon, Geltrude Pellegrini and her husband settled in Rome; their daily life began—and continued—in tranquility and serenity. Toto was deeply in love with his wife, and her reserved nature served only to fuel his passion—a passion that manifested itself in boundless acts of kindness, solicitude, and generosity. It was not long before admirers began to gather around this strikingly beautiful woman—just as they had once flocked around the graceful young girl—but to no avail. Geltrude proved impervious to every attempt at seduction; she knew how to curb the audacity of even the most forward suitors without provoking scandal or compromising either her husband's reputation or the affairs of his business—matters in which she soon demonstrated a shrewdness and a tact that were truly uncommon.

Thus, she won the affection of all—and, along with that affection, their respect and admiration. People had expected to be dealing with a mere country girl; instead, they found themselves face-to-face with a woman who was not only refined but possessed a bearing and an upbringing that were almost aristocratic. "Just look how lucky that Toto is," his companions would say. "He's already pushing forty, yet he's snagged himself a real prize—a woman as honest and virtuous as she is beautiful, and as savvy in the ways of the shop as if she'd been born to it."

Toto rejoiced in his wife's triumphs, feeling his adoration for her grow ever deeper. He harbored but one sorrow: the lack of children. He attributed this to Geltrude's reticence, yet he took comfort in telling himself: "What has not come yet, will come." And to those friends who, to tease him, would ask if he needed any "assistance" in securing an heir, he would reply:

"Go right ahead—try your luck, if you think you can manage it."

Such was the magnitude of the trust he placed in his wife's unimpeachable virtue.

Had Geltrude truly forgotten her first and only love? Had her heart withered away completely? Had

that ardor in her blood—the very passion that had driven her to give herself so utterly to Enrico—finally been extinguished?

We shall see.

Chapter LXXII

Although he, too, was now settled in Rome, the romantic young woman—who had once been enamored of the fair-haired hunter from Monteguidone—had never laid eyes on him since. And this fact contributed to her peace of mind. One morning, Geltrude was sitting in the back of the shop when her attention was drawn by the distant, chanting murmur of voices drawing ever closer; at the same moment, she saw people outside beginning to crowd onto the sidewalks. It must be a funeral procession of some significance. Driven by curiosity, she, too, stepped forward to watch the funeral cortege file past from the shop's very threshold.

"It's a spinster, poor soul," said a little woman. "Look—she has the white pall draped over her coffin."

"No," replied another.

"Then who is it?"

"A lady who died in childbirth."

"Poor thing! Did she leave any children behind?"

"No. It was her first—after many years of marriage."

"Just imagine—what a tragedy."

Meanwhile, the procession drew nearer, preceded and followed by a host of friars from various orders and a crowd of respectable citizens bearing large wax tapers, who alternated between reciting prayers and singing funeral hymns. And the chatter among the onlookers—both men and women—continued unabated. Those who knew something of the story spoke up, eager to show how well-informed they were; those who knew nothing either invented tall tales or asked their neighbors for details.

"Look!" exclaimed the woman who seemed most in the know. "There's the husband—following the coffin, alongside her father and brothers."

"Which one is the husband?" voices asked from every side.

"The fair-haired one over there, in the middle—dressed entirely in black."

"He's a handsome young man; he'll find consolation soon enough."

"Poor Sor Enrico!" Upon hearing that name, Geltrude—seized by a strange premonition—stepped out of the shop and, mingling with the crowd, turned her gaze toward the spot indicated by the

little woman. She turned suddenly pale and leaned against the wall; indeed, she would undoubtedly have collapsed to the ground had the bystanders not noticed her plight and rushed to support her.

"Sora Geltrude is fainting! We must carry her inside the shop," said a neighboring shopkeeper.

"Poor soul! She is such a kind woman. She simply couldn't withstand the emotion."

"When you haven't got the courage of a chicken, you ought to just stay home."

Such were the comments circulating among the crowd as a strong young man lifted her into his arms and carried her into the shop.

Geltrude's fainting spell caused a brief commotion within the funeral procession; it was noticed by those forming the cortege—and most notably by the fair-haired young man designated to play the role of the bereaved widower—who appeared deeply moved by the incident. Even as he continued to follow the bier of the deceased, he frequently turned his head toward Geltrude's shop until, at last, he caught sight of her.

"It is a source of comfort to those who suffer—to see their own grief shared by others," a stern-looking gentleman pronounced, responding to the observation of someone who had found such behavior rather peculiar.

When Toto returned home, he found his beloved wife resting upon the bed, surrounded by the shop apprentices and the neighborhood women—for Geltrude's fainting spell had bordered on a complete collapse. Her distress did not subside until she saw his wife fully recovered.

Yet it must be said that the shock the woman had suffered was truly profound, for it left behind a lingering sadness—one she strove in vain to overcome.

Chapter LXXIII

Thus passed a week. At dusk on a Saturday, Geltrude stood on the threshold of the shop, watching the crowd of people coming and going in every direction, when her eyes fixed upon a man standing motionless on the street corner opposite, gazing intently at her shop. She was not long in recognizing him as Enrico, the fair-haired hunter from Monteguidone, the inconsolable widower she had seen just seven days earlier following his wife's bier. A sudden surge of emotion seized her; with a brief inclination of her head, she gave an affirmative sign in response to the silent question he seemed to be posing. Enrico took a few steps down the street, then turned back; passing close by Toto's shop, he handed Geltrude a small rolled-up scrap of paper he held between his fingers—doing so without pausing and without offering a greeting.

Geltrude slipped the note into her pocket and promptly retreated into the shop; the apprentices had already lit the lamps, and she was able to read it. It read simply: "Sunday at 10:00 at San Pietro." She rose, tore the note into tiny shreds, and, returning to the shop's threshold, scattered them out into the street. She had resolved to conquer that temptation, to resist the impulse that was sweeping her away, to decline the rendezvous, and to remain a faithful and blameless wife. Yet memories of the past regained their hold during the night—a night she spent in great agitation. Toward morning, she believed she had won the battle and that duty had emerged victorious; she then fell asleep, resolving irrevocably not to attend the meeting—to nip in the bud the passion that threatened to reawaken. She slept until eight o'clock that morning, lulled by rosy dreams filled with gentle and caressing visions. When she awoke, victory still lay firmly in the hands of Love. Toto had gone out without waking her, leaving word that he would not return until evening, as he had to go to Frascati on some business of his own. Geltrude dressed with her customary elegance—though without any ostentation of trinkets or jewels—stepped out, and found herself—almost without realizing it, perhaps even against her will—upon the steps of St. Peter's. At the portal of the basilica, Enrico was waiting for her. What did they say to one another?

Just one thing. Enrico was free to marry her. Geltrude, however, was no longer free. She belonged to another man. Enrico still loved her desperately—just as he had on the very first day he laid eyes on her. Geltrude loved him no less, yet she had lacked the courage to wait. The insurmountable

obstacle to their happiness was one she herself had created. Were they to resume a clandestine affair? If so, why had they broken it off—or rather, severed it so violently—back at Monteguidone?

Upon leaving the basilica, they had climbed up to Monte Mario; Rome was already beginning to shroud itself in the mists of twilight when they finally decided to descend. Enrico escorted the beautiful woman—now fully resolved to sin—as far as Ponte Sant'Angelo, and Geltrude returned home just minutes before her husband.

"Did you go out today?" he asked her.

"I spent the day at Monte Mario; I needed to get some fresh air."

"You did well. Do you feel better now?"

"I feel wonderful."

They dined cheerfully, and having retired early, Geltrude gave herself to her husband with a lavishness—and an intensity—far exceeding her usual manner. But to whom, in truth, did her thoughts take flight?

Toto felt blissful and utterly content. Which only goes to show: happiness is relative.

The secret meetings between the two lovers grew in frequency, yet they were conducted with the utmost caution. Geltrude often asked Enrico:

"If I were free?"

"I would marry you."

"Would you leave Rome?"

"With you, I would go even to the ends of the earth."

Chapter LXXIV

Toto, urged on by Geltrude, had sold his shop, for he intended to retire from business. He was wealthy enough to do so, and it seemed almost too good to be true that he could dedicate his entire life to his wife—whose erotic ardor had, for some time now, become utterly intoxicating. He could not explain this strange metamorphosis, yet he accepted its benefits without inquiring into its cause. Perhaps—owing to that vanity innate in the human soul—he attributed it to the fervor of his own love, or to the vigor of his embraces.

Geltrude was in the grip of an extraordinary state of erotic overexcitement. Her trysts with her lover were not enough to satiate her; she sought further release with her husband. Yet later, once the effervescence of passion had subsided, he would inspire in her an invincible repugnance. She was, however, sufficiently cunning—and by now sufficiently depraved—to conceal it. Nevertheless, the thought that by giving up his shop and business affairs she would find herself entirely at that man's mercy—that she would have him constantly at her side, and would no longer be able to meet with her idol—terrified her, and steeled her resolve in the ruthless plan she had already hatched: to rid herself of him. That night was to be the last of her torment. She had to escape this untenable situation at any cost.

She kept in the house a long, sharp knife: one that appeared to have been fashioned from a section of a sword blade, shaped into a dagger. While he, exhausted by their amorous struggle, had drifted off to sleep, Geltrude slipped quietly out of bed and went to arm herself with that deadly instrument. Upon returning, she noticed that her husband had opened his eyes; she hastened to conceal the weapon beneath her pillow. The man did indeed wake up and asked her:

"What is the matter, Geltrude?"

"Nothing, my love," the treacherous woman replied. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I am still in the throes of the ineffable pleasure you have bestowed upon me."

"You are an angel!"

By way of reply, Geltrude once again twined her white arms—exquisitely sculpted—around his neck; then, burying her hand, with its rosy, tapering fingers, in his hair, she drew him close and kissed him on the mouth.

It was a new round of passion—long, terrible, and grueling—at the end of which the poor husband lay utterly exhausted, drained of all strength, unable to lift even an arm in his own defense.

For a long while, Geltrude remained there, smiling as she watched him; and he—the unsuspecting fool—drifted peacefully into sleep, lulled by that gaze which he believed to be filled with love and gratitude. Once she had assured herself that her husband was immersed in a deep, heavy slumber, Geltrude sprang from the bed, still half-naked as she was, and, seizing a dagger, plunged it into his chest with a terrible thrust, cleaving his heart in two.

The wretched man uttered not a sound; he merely widened his eyes in shock, then instantly closed them again, as if unwilling to recognize the person who had struck the fatal blow. A few brief moments later, he lay dead and rigid in the bed. Geltrude drew the bedclothes over his head, leaving the dagger still embedded in the wound; then, quite calmly—without a shadow of terror or remorse—she set about getting dressed. Fate had already cleared the first obstacle to her happiness by claiming the life of her lover's wife during childbirth; she therefore deemed it only natural that she herself should now remove the other impediment. That man, old and ugly as he was, had enjoyed her favors for far too long. He certainly could not claim that he had paid too high a price.

Such were the thoughts of the murderess as she made her preparations to depart. Having gathered all her valuables—the money her husband had realized from the sale of the shop, which had already taken place, and the securities she possessed—and having placed them in a suitcase, which she then packed with her necessary clothing and linens, she put the remainder of her belongings into another suitcase and quietly slipped out, carefully locking the door behind her.

Chapter LXXV

It was just beginning to dawn when she arrived at her lover's house—weary, exhausted, and breathless, yet still intoxicated with love and eager to throw herself into his arms.

Hearing a light knock at the door, Enrico climbed out of bed and went to open it, unable to imagine who could possibly be looking for him at such an hour. But the moment he saw her, he exclaimed, surprised and still half in a dream:

"Geltrude!"

"It's me."

"You? Here? At this hour? How?"

"Let me bring the suitcases inside, and you'll find out."

"Suitcases?"

"Yes, does that surprise you?"

The young man acceded to Geltrude's request, for he could not bring himself to cruelly leave her standing on his doorstep. Yet this burden that had suddenly fallen upon his shoulders did not please him in the slightest; indeed, it troubled him deeply. Like all lovers, in the throes of passion he had answered every one of his beloved's questions in the affirmative, even though they had seemed to him quite strange and reckless. But he was far from believing that those plans—born of intoxication, exchanged between kisses—would ever actually materialize; and certainly not that they would materialize so swiftly. Once they had carried the two suitcases inside, a chilled Enrico burrowed back beneath the covers.

"What are you doing?" Geltrude asked him in astonishment.

"Can't you see? I'm going back to bed. It's bitterly cold out here. I wouldn't want to catch a chill. It's all too easy to end up in the next world, and that would suit your husband a little *too* well."

At this remark, Geltrude smiled ominously; her eyes flashed with a fiery glint. Although taken aback by such a reception, she uttered not a word; and, assuming her lover simply desired to enjoy her company, she began to undress.

"Are you coming to bed, too?" Enrico asked her, "Since you are here…"

"It is the best thing left for us to do. We must, however, think about leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Certainly. Surely you don't expect me to stay here? The scandal would be too great, and with the scandal comes danger."

Enrico's anxieties grew by the moment. He was in no way inclined to entangle himself in the complications of a clandestine union with a woman who had fled her marital home. His thoughts went no further than that. In the first flush of passion, upon encountering Geltrude, everything had seemed possible to him. But once that initial enthusiasm had cooled, his powers of reflection reasserted themselves. And he had already reached the point of regarding that love—so fervent and so exclusive—as a grave encumbrance.

Geltrude, for her part, had realized that Enrico had not grasped what had transpired between her and her husband, and she could not summon the courage to confess it. Once she had completely undressed and settled into bed, she thought that a confession might come more naturally to her amidst the delirium of their embraces. But even that delirium never came. Wholly absorbed in thoughts of the consequences of Geltrude's flight, Enrico proved a wretched lover that morning; he lacked the enthusiasm, if not the stamina and vigor. Geltrude felt a cruel disappointment at this, yet she did not give up hope.

"Now we must get up," she said.

"You go ahead and get up."

"And you?"

"I'm staying put."

"But you fool! We can't stay here!" Geltrude exclaimed, utterly dumbfounded by her lover's behavior. "We have to leave, or else we'll be caught."

"Listen, Geltrude," Enrico replied, now fully resolved to disabuse the woman of her illusions and send her back to her husband. "Follies are always follies. It is easy enough to speak of them when one's head is heated and one's judgment clouded; but before committing them, one must think—and think very carefully—about the consequences."

"It is too late for that now; the deed is done."

"It is never too late to remedy a mistake, a lapse, or a sin." Geltrude attempted to smile once more; but what appeared on her face was not even a bitter sneer: it was merely a spasmodic twitching of the mouth.

Fortunately, her lover did not see it; it would have filled him with horror. Enrico continued:

"Go back to your husband; spin him any tall tale you like, and he will believe you. What *won't* husbands believe when it comes to avoiding the loss of a beautiful little wife like you?"

These blandishments, far from flattering Geltrude, caused her to turn as pale as a corpse. Her lover's coldness came as a dousing shower upon the passion that had driven her to the very act of murdering her husband. At that instant, the specter of the slain man rose before her eyes, terrible and menacing. She began to feel lost—irredeemably lost—and she was aghast.

"Impossible!" she murmured, shuddering.

"Why impossible?"

"Impossible, I tell you."

"Nonsense. Go to a hotel with your suitcases. Write him a letter telling him you've left his house because... because…"

"Because I have a lover?" asked Geltrude, her voice tinged with tragic irony.

"That's hardly the point. But you wouldn't be the first: just as you wouldn't be the first to be forgiven by a cuckolded husband."

"Enrico, you have lost me!"

"No, I have found you."

"Are you mocking me? Do you not remember swearing to me that you would live only for me —only for *us*—once the obstacle dividing us had been removed?"

"Very well. But the obstacle still exists, and, for the time being, at least, it cannot be cleared away. Nor is there any urgency. Are we not happy as we are? Can we not continue to be just as happy?"

"Happy? I believed I could still be happy… in spite of…"

"In spite of what?"

"In spite of everything. But the glacial coldness with which you receive me, with which you answer the woman who sacrificed everything for you... it has utterly disillusioned me."

"Words! Words! You blessed women, you simply cannot exist without chattering, without declaiming, without weeping…"

"Weeping? *I*? Listen to me. I did not weep the day I learned I had given myself to a man who could not marry me; I did not weep last night when I made my decision…"

"To flee from your husband. It would have been better had you shed a few tears and made up with him."

"Vile wretch! Coward! Scoundrel!" screamed Geltrude, who had climbed out of bed and was in the midst of dressing, advancing with clenched fists toward Enrico, who was still lying down. And perhaps, had she held in her hand the dagger with which she had pierced her husband's heart during the night, she would have done the very same to her lover.

Enrico attempted to pacify her.

"Come now, what kind of foul words are these, Geltrude? I have never heard them pass your lips before. Why would you sully them now?"

The young man had poured all the tenderness—all the sweetness of which he was capable—into this gentle rebuke; to Geltrude's ears, his voice sounded exquisitely sweet.

Chapter LXXVI

In the blink of an eye, her grim memories and grim intentions vanished. She leaned over her lover, kissed him—and was kissed in return—with all the outpouring of her soul, and whispered in his ear:

"If only you knew how much I love you."

"I know; I believe you, and I love you no less."

"And yet you cast me out."

"I am not casting you out at all. I am stopping you from committing an act of madness, one that would be your ruin."

"Let’s run away, Enrico. I can stay here no longer, and I refuse to leave without you."

"Oh, give it a rest with this obsession!"

"You call it an obsession?"

"Yes, if 'obsession' still means something utterly impossible."

"But don't you understand? I cannot return to my husband’s house—the home I abandoned forever—after taking everything with me... *everything*: both my belongings and his? Look inside those suitcases; they hold all my husband’s worldly goods. The proceeds from the sale of his shop, the cash, the jewelry, the securities." At this revelation, Enrico sat bolt upright in bed, seized by a horror he made no attempt to conceal.

"But this is an abomination! You want to make me out to be your accomplice; you want to dishonor me! Before, I merely *begged* you to return to your husband; now, I *demand* it."

"You demand it?"

"Certainly. Just as I demand that you take those things back to him. My hands feel as if they’re burning, simply for having touched those suitcases. If word of this were to get out... if anyone were to believe it…"

"No one will find out, and no one will believe a thing, rest assured of that."

"I could well brave your husband’s righteous indignation and wrath for having stolen his wife; but I would die of shame if he had any reason to suspect that…"

"Have no fear; he won’t suspect a thing."

"Surely he must notice…"

"He won’t notice a thing."

"Geltrude, explain yourself. What secrets are you hiding from me?"

"No secrets at all. My husband was the obstacle that kept us apart; you told me that if he were removed, you would marry me, and we would be freely united for the rest of our lives."

"Well?"

"Well, that obstacle no longer exists."

"How?"

"He has been eliminated."

"Stop with the ambiguities, in God’s name! Don’t torment me. Speak!"

"Do you want to know everything?"

"Everything."

"I killed him last night, at the break of dawn—a quarter of an hour before arriving here—with this very hand that he kissed so many, many times. I killed him for you, for the sake of your love; I killed him so I could become your wife."

"Horrible! Horrible!" Enrico exclaimed, clutching his head with both hands to quell the tumult of his thoughts. "And this monster—this murderess—lavished her caresses upon me with hands still stained with blood!"

Enrico accompanied these words with such a gesture of disgust, nausea, and revulsion that it struck Geltrude to the very depths of her heart. She realized that everything was over for her; and, without another moment’s hesitation, she once again gathered her two suitcases and rushed out the door without uttering a single word, and without her lover making any attempt to stop her.

As soon as he saw she had left, Enrico sprang from the bed, ran to close the door, and bolted it, glancing fearfully around the room lest he catch sight of her again.

Chapter LXXVII

Upon leaving her lover's house, Geltrude encountered a carriage; calling out to the coachman, she had her two suitcases loaded aboard and ordered him to take her to Monsignor Fiscale. She was extremely pale; her hair stood disheveled upon her forehead, her eyes were sunken, and her lips trembled, she was feverish. Yet the cool morning air calmed her, and she arrived before the Monsignor in a state fit to be received without alarming the ushers or guards. The stern magistrate, the moment he saw her—still beautiful, indeed perhaps rendered even more alluring by the pallor of her face and her look of utter despondency—rose, stepped forward courteously to meet her, and invited her to sit in the finest armchair in his study. Then, drawing another chair up beside her, just as he might have done for a lady of high rank, he asked her:

"What may I do for you? Rest assured, in advance, of my utmost deference."

Geltrude let out a deep sigh.

"Some secret sorrow surely brings you here," the Fiscale continued. "Speak freely to me. In the exercise of my duties, I am a living tomb; these walls have neither eyes nor ears."

"I have a terrible revelation to make to you, Monsignor," Geltrude murmured, fixing her eyes upon his.

"I am listening, and I shall be happy to be of service to you."

"For me, there is no possible solace, despite your good intentions."

"You are laboring under a dark impression; calm yourself. There is a remedy for everything, save for death."

"Monsignor has spoken the truth."

"A great misfortune has befallen you; is that it? Are you, perhaps, a victim…"

"Yes, a victim of a terrible, ruinous passion that has driven me to commit a crime."

"To commit a crime?" the public prosecutor asked slowly, taking off his glasses, cleaning the lenses, and then fixing his gaze sharply upon Geltrude's eyes.

"Yes, Monsignor. A crime."

"A frank confession mitigates the severity of the penalty and secures for you divine grace. Explain yourself."

"I killed my husband."

"Out of jealousy, perhaps?"

"No, out of love."

"For another man?"

"Precisely."

"Was this other man an accomplice?"

"Entirely unaware."

"Can one truly believe a woman who is so in love that she would kill her husband…"

"...merely to get him out of the way and marry her lover? It would seem not. And yet, that is the truth."

"We shall see."

"You can see it clearly, even at this very moment."

"How?"

"He has rejected me; he has cast me out. He may even turn me in."

At this juncture, Geltrude Pellegrini recounted to the prosecutor every detail of the crime and of the scene that had subsequently unfolded between herself and Enrico at his home; yet she adamantly refused to reveal his name or to provide any information that might lead to his identification. The most scrupulous secrecy had always governed their relationship, and no investigation could possibly have uncovered his identity. Despite the crushing disappointment she had suffered—and despite the profound insult she felt she had endured at his hands (for such she deemed the contempt he had shown her)—she wished to spare him the anguish of being implicated in the trial. And in this resolve, she remained unyielding and shrewd.

The interview between Geltrude and the prosecutor concluded with the arrest of the accused woman and the seizure of the two suitcases she had brought with her.

The preliminary investigation into the case dragged on for a considerable time, as the examining magistrate insisted upon exhausting every avenue in an effort to locate the lover and question him, even though it appeared patently obvious that he could have had absolutely no complicity in Geltrude’s crime. Upon the pronouncement of the death sentence, Pellegrini requested religious rites; she appeared contrite and devout, resigned yet courageous, and convinced that she had deserved the punishment inflicted upon her.

On the morning of January 9, 1838, the day the execution took place, a profound sense of emotion gripped every soul in Rome. The trial had aroused immense interest; the renown of Geltrude’s

beauty only served to fuel the fascination. The crowd gathered in a dense mass before the prison, along every street through which the somber procession was destined to pass, and at the very site of the execution. The windows of the surrounding houses were thronged with onlookers, just like the streets below, and from every quarter, eyes and spyglasses were trained upon the cart.

Upon reaching the scaffold, she stepped down from the vehicle with a steady gait, bearing herself with modesty, yet without a trace of dejection. The dark gown she wore, cascading in ample folds down her figure, served to accentuate her statuesque form and lent a certain air of pathos to her exquisite features. She was pale, yet unbroken. She ascended the steps of the gallows with unwavering resolve; then, having kissed the crucifix offered to her by her confessor while the other spiritual comforters withdrew, she submitted her head to the blade. No sooner had it fallen beneath the stroke of the guillotine than I seized the beautiful woman's head by the hair; lifting it high, I displayed it to the crowd: a multitude left utterly stunned and moved in a way I had never before witnessed.

Chapter LXXVIII

Pietro Tagliacozzo of Olevano, the only son of a wealthy landowner who had lost his father at a very young age, was raised by his mother, whose one failing was her determination to turn him into a man of consequence. First, she attempted to steer him toward an ecclesiastical career. She was captivated by the notion that she might one day become the mother of a bishop, a prelate, or a cardinal —and who knew? Perhaps even of a Pope. If Sixtus V could ascend to the Chair of Saint Peter after having once tended swine, why could her son not do the same: he who, after all, hailed from a rural family that was nonetheless wealthy and universally esteemed? Pietro, however, dissuaded her from this plan, demonstrating an inclination toward anything and everything save for becoming a shepherd of souls.

The good woman then conceived the idea of making him a great scientist, a renowned physician, a distinguished lawyer, or perhaps an architect-engineer whose fame would eclipse even that of Bernini, the man who had rebuilt half of modern Rome. To this end, she sent him to the University of Rome.

Pietro Tagliacozzo promptly seized the opportunity to strike up friendships with the most celebrated daredevils in the Eternal City, the most seasoned libertines and revelers, and within a short time, he earned a reputation as the foremost among them. Consequently, at the Sapienza University, the professors knew him by name, for he had indeed enrolled in their courses, and they were well aware of his exploits, as his escapades were frequently the subject of conversation; yet, not a single one of them knew him in person.

Before long, however, these merry banquets, pleasure excursions to the Castelli, lavish feasts, and customary amusements began to pall on him. He craved something with a bit more spice… and he found it. A friend, one of those he had made frequenting billiard halls, cafés, and dining establishments, proposed taking him to a certain house: a place populated by charming, lively young women, where one could make love, dine, and gamble—above all, gamble. Pietro Tagliacozzo accepted with great spirit, and before long, he became one of the house's most assiduous patrons.

He gambled and lost with great distinction: that is to say, without despairing; and he gambled and won with great grace, squandering his winnings on his friends and, in particular, on the young ladies whose welcome presence enlivened the house.

Among these women, one of the most striking and refined was Lalla, a Frenchwoman who had recently settled in Rome and who had exchanged her given name, Mélanie, for this nickname—a *nom de guerre*, as it were. From her Parisian roots, she possessed a delicate charm, a knack for petty deceptions—and even major ones—and an insatiable greed, all skillfully masked. From her Roman surroundings, she had acquired a magnificence of form, a sparkle in her black eyes—at once fiery and lascivious—gorgeous black hair, and a studied air of languid abandon. Sensing Pietro's attraction to her, and being the calculating woman she was, Lalla treated him with a coldness and aloofness that bordered on the unreasonable. She made a deliberate point of avoiding any one-on-one encounters with him; yet, whenever they found themselves in company, where there was no risk of him pressing his advances beyond the bounds of propriety, she would assail him, enveloping him in her gaze. One fine evening, however, Pietro managed to draw her aside into a corner of the gaming salon, into the deep recess of a window, concealed behind heavy drapes, and seized her by the hands.

"This time," he told her, "you will not escape me."

"What do you want from me?"

"I desire an explanation."

"And is that why you are using force against me?"

"Far be that idea from me."

"Speak, then."

"Do you detest me?"

"A fine presumption."

"What do you mean, a fine presumption?"

"To detest you would be to single you out from the others, and that is something I do not wish to do."

"Not even to detest me?"

"No. One begins by detesting, and ends by loving."

"Detest me, then, I implore you!"

"Only to end up at the other extreme?"

"At love."

"At love? That is precisely what I do *not* want."

"Your virtue, then, is unshakeable."

"Do you truly believe in that absurdity known as virtue?"

"That is an awkward question. Allow me to think it over. I shall give you my answer this evening, after dinner, provided you deign to dine with me."

"Where? Here?"

"No: at Lepri's."

"So be it."

Two hours later, Lalla and Pietro Tagliacozzo were dining in an elegant private salon at the celebrated Roman restaurant, where the sauces and savory dishes were working wonders.

Having cast aside the air of wild aloofness she had hitherto maintained with such consummate artistry to better ensnare her unsuspecting quarry, Lalla had become sweet, chatty, and effusive. Pietro was radiant with happiness, though it was, perhaps, a relative sort of happiness. Suddenly, the enchanting young woman slipped an arm around the waist of the—shall we say—less-than-diligent student; drawing her face close to his, as if silently urging him to kiss her, she asked:

"You owe me an answer: do you, then, believe in virtue?"

Pietro circled her neck with his left arm and, drawing her gently toward him, pressed his own ardent lips against hers: lips that were quivering with a voluptuous desire no less intense than his own. And it was a long, intense, ineffable kiss, in which it seemed that the souls of those two young people wished to merge into one.

Chapter LXXIX

The following morning, when Pietro had left that delightful alcove where, during a night brimming with love, he had distilled such happiness with Lalla, she stretched languidly upon the bed, casting aside the covers. Thinking of the promise made by her new lover, she drifted off to sleep, murmuring:

"Will that fool come? If he doesn't, it would prove he isn't one. But he will come… oh yes, he will come." And a cynically mocking smile played upon her small, coral-red lips: still dewy, and never sated with kisses.

What was Lalla waiting for?

A very simple thing: two thousand scudi, which she needed to pay her dressmaker, a woman who had inflicted upon her the indignity of having her furniture seized. Without those two thousand scudi, poor Mélanie would have been forced to abandon her little apartment on Via del Babuino: that sweet, sweet nest where Pietro had tasted the joys of paradise. She would have had to move into furnished rooms or a hotel, where they would be granted no freedom whatsoever; she might even have had to return to Paris and bid a final farewell to beautiful Italy, to magnificent Rome, and to her brand-new lover. After all, what were two thousand scudi? A mere pittance. She had been offered jewels worth far more than that on several occasions, simply for the price of a kiss, yet she had refused.

Naturally, she had confided all this to Pietro between one embrace and the next, between a smile and a tear, between a soft kiss and a playful nip.

And Pietro had hastened to promise her the two thousand scudi; yet he did not possess them. To write to his mother and have her send the money would take too long and, moreover, would require a very plausible pretext. However, he knew a Jew who lent money at the honest rate of two hundred percent: a man to whom he had never turned before, yet whose habits he knew down to the last detail. Upon leaving Lalla, he headed straight to him. The Jew received him as if he had been expecting him for a long time: cordially, affably, and respectfully. But when Pietro began to broach the subject of money, a thousand difficulties immediately arose. First of all, he simply didn’t have the funds on hand. He would have to turn to others to procure them—and perhaps he could find them—but would he be satisfied with Tagliacozzo’s mere signature? Pietro would vouch for him; yet the moneylender would

not lend without a written guarantee. And Pietro, for all the gold in the world, would not put his name down on paper.

Pietro grew impatient; but the implacable Jew continued to lay out the difficulties. Meanwhile, Lalla had awakened from the long slumber that had restored her physical strength—exhausted by the previous night's revelry—and was stretching her exquisite limbs like a young panther feeling the first stirrings of love. With her head framed by her fair arms as they propped her up, her full, bare bosom rising firm amidst the delicate lace of her chemise, and the lush, supple lines of her body shifting with feline grace, she waited for Pietro, surprised by his delay.

It was already two o'clock in the afternoon when young Tagliacozzo finally appeared. He had fought a great battle, and won it. The Jew had yielded to his entreaties and had procured two thousand scudi for him. But at what cost?

Lalla welcomed him with the most caressing of her smiles. She told him that she had not wanted to accept his courtship sooner because she felt she would love him too much, and she did not want to love, for loving brought her pain. But now, it was done. And she had already experienced her first pang of sorrow over her own delay. She feared she would never see him again; she feared she had destroyed all the poetry between them with that prosaic question she had asked him. It had been a foolish mistake. She could have done without it. Even if they were to sell off her furniture, they would not lack for a refuge. The sunshine of their love would have brightened even a cave.

Listening to her, Pietro was intoxicated. He would have signed not just a single promissory note, but an entire stack of them, simply to please that celestial creature: so graceful, so loving, and so selfless.

Chapter LXXX

The affair between the man from Olevano and the capricious Parisian woman continued; the promissory notes multiplied, as did his requests for money from his mother. The due dates arrived, and Pietro, unable to meet them, was forced to renew the notes, thereby piling interest upon interest. When the total sum reached a colossal figure, *il Giudìo*—the moneylender—deemed it prudent to take legal action against his young client; he successfully obtained a writ of attachment on the assets owned by Pietro: assets over which his mother held the right of usufruct[xxx]. The poor woman's indignation at this disaster was terrible. Spirited as she was, she enlisted the aid of an expert lawyer and, by threatening criminal prosecution for usury, managed to settle her son's debts, having first stripped away the exorbitant interest charges that had caused them to balloon out of all proportion. She then allotted him a monthly allowance, warning him that, aside from that stipend, she would not give him another penny. And, as if that were not enough, she petitioned for, and obtained, a court order placing him under legal guardianship, thereby rendering null and void any debts he might subsequently incur. In this way, she intended to safeguard his inheritance.

Pietro did not let these events weigh too heavily upon him. He knew—or at least believed—that he was loved by Lalla; and that knowledge sufficed to console him for the privations to which he would, for a time, be obliged to submit. Yet he harbored doubts as to whether Lalla would be equally willing to submit to a curtailment of the lavish expenses she had saddled him with.

Thus, delighted to have extricated himself from the financial entanglements that had besieged him for so long, he returned to Rome. He arrived armed with a tidy little nest egg, funds he had wheedled out of his mother under the pretext of setting up his own independent household in order to save money.

He received a most enthusiastic welcome from his affectionate paramour who, with her tiny, mouse-like white teeth, proceeded to help him gnaw his way through the small fortune he had brought back from Olevano. Before long, he found himself empty-handed; and having exhausted the indulgence of a few friends, he was forced to retrace his steps to the old Jew. The latter, no sooner had he laid eyes on him, flew into an absolute fury. He called him a ragamuffin, a thief, a murderer. He told him that he had usurped the fruits of his sweat and toil. He called down upon him the thunderbolts of the God of

Israel and ordered him to leave through the door before he lost the last shred of his reason and was driven to throw him out the window instead.

Pietro, who by now had grown thick-skinned to the Jew's outbursts, listened patiently to his insults until the very end, and only decided to answer him once he had been ordered to leave.

"It is truly a waste of time to try and deal like a gentleman with scoundrels," he exclaimed, taking a step toward the door.

"What do you mean by that? Who is the scoundrel, and who is the gentleman? Explain yourself!" screamed the Jew.

"The gentleman—strictly speaking—is me; as for the scoundrel, I leave it to you to guess who that might be."

"A fine gentleman, indeed! After having squandered the sacred fruits of my money!"

"I would point out that I have squandered nothing more than what you actually handed over to me."

"And the interest? What about the interest?"

"It wasn't I who took that from you."

"Then who was it?"

"My mother's lawyer."

"Another gentleman just like…"

"Just like whom?"

"Just like you!"

"You aren't in the mood for compliments this morning. And yet, to show you that I am indeed the man I claim to be, I came here to propose a way to secure the proceeds from those crops, crops that were arbitrarily seized from you by the lawyer."

"Do you have the cash? Hand it over, and I'll proclaim you the pearl—the phoenix—of honest men."

"Well, truth be told, I don't actually have the cash; but…"

"If you don't have it, that's your own fault; you should have paid on time."

"No, it's *yours*. You should have waited a little longer."

"You know perfectly well that the creditors refused to wait any longer."

"And in doing so, they damaged both their business and mine. But there is still time to set things right."

"How?"

"I will issue you a promissory note for the value of the crops."

"A promissory note without your signature is worth no more than the cost of the stamp duty; signed by you, it isn't even worth *that* much."

"You aren't being very polite."

"You are under legal interdiction."

"No, not *interdicted*: merely placed under my mother's guardianship."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"That guardianship will eventually come to an end."

"As long as your mother is alive, I have my serious doubts about that."

"My mother won't live forever."

"Jehovah didn't have a wife, after all."

"A promissory note with no fixed maturity date, then."

"To make it enforceable—assuming you didn't want to risk having it challenged in court—the date of issue would have to be left blank as well."

"I will draw it up exactly as you wish."

"Better something than nothing, I suppose."

"Will you restore your trust in me, then?"

"I acknowledge that your intentions are good; but as for trust... we shall wait until the note comes due."

The judge took out a promissory note and handed it to Pietro, saying:

"Here you are. Fill in the amount and sign it."

"We haven't actually agreed on the amount yet."

"Ah! I understand; you are asking how much you must add to cover the interest on the time I will have to wait. I wish to show myself generous, and I will charge you nothing for this."

"Thank you. But we have not yet reached the crux of the matter."

"And what might that be?"

"I require a thousand or so scudi. Give them to me, and we shall make it a round sum."

"Have you lost your mind? A thousand scudi for *you*? That would be like throwing them out the window."

"Let us consider it unsaid, then. I am leaving."

"And the promissory note?"

"If my signature—even left blank—is not worth a thousand scudi, then I had best spare myself the trouble of sullying the note."

"Hah! Is this your idea of gentlemanly conduct?"

"I require a thousand scudi."

The debate dragged on for a long time. The outcome was that the Jew produced four hundred scudi, and Pietro issued him a promissory note for a thousand, over and above the amount of the accrued interest. Unfortunately, it seemed that Lalla's appetite grew in inverse proportion to her lover's funds.

Every day brought new whims, each more costly than the last. Within eight days, the four hundred scudi from the Jew had vanished into thin air.

Chapter LXXXI

Tagliacozzo returned to the moneylender, but no matter how hard he pressed the point, he failed to squeeze a single penny out of him.

"Is there absolutely no way to raise some cash using my signature?" the dissolute young man finally asked.

"With your signature? No."

"What if I could get the signature of a friend?"

"That would be even worse. Your friends are more deeply in debt than you are, and they haven't even the slightest hope of ever getting out of their financial mess."

"Whose signature, then, would you accept?"

"Your mother's."

"My mother's signature? Impossible! She would never give me the money."

"Then go and ask her for it."

"She'd have me locked up in a madhouse."

"Then there is no point in wasting any more time talking."

"What if I were to bring you my mother's signature?"

"I would wait until the promissory note came due to verify its authenticity."

"Ah! But what you are suggesting is monstrous!"

"I am suggesting nothing at all."

Pietro understood exactly what the Jew wanted: to hold in his hands a document that would force the old woman to pay up in order to save her honor. Yet, corrupt though he was, the very idea of committing forgery filled him with revulsion.

He returned to Lalla empty-handed. He had moved in with her and, come what may, he had to provide for her. He managed to scrape by for a few days through sheer improvisation. But his "sweet friend" soon grew fed up with this state of affairs and told him, in no uncertain terms, to get out of her sight. She had absolutely no use for a penniless lover. The very next morning, Pietro Tagliacozzo brought the Jew a promissory note for ten thousand lire bearing his mother's signature: forged by his own hand, of course. The Jew smirked and handed over seven thousand lire. Lalla immediately bestowed her affection upon him once more. A month later, the scene repeated itself, and so it did the

following month. Thus arrived the due date for the first forged promissory note. Before it could be presented, Pietro traveled to Olevano. His mother—who as yet knew nothing—was delighted to see her son again and lavished upon him the warmest of welcomes. They dined together, and when they had finished, his mother asked him to explain the reason that had brought him to the village.

Pietro hesitated. He wanted to ask her for the money so he could pay the note himself and keep his perfidy a secret, but he could not summon the courage. Finally, he blurted out the audacious request:

"Mother, I need two thousand scudi."

The old woman sprang up in her chair as if seized by a sudden spasm, and flew into a violent rage.

"Mother, I need them desperately! My honor is at stake!"

"Honor? What honor! You incorrigible scoundrel!" the old woman screamed.

Pietro had turned as pale as a corpse; he begged and implored his mother—kneeling before her with tears in his eyes, sobbing uncontrollably.

His pleas were in vain, and the wretched man found himself compelled to reveal to her the fatal secret of the forged signatures. At this news, the old woman's indignation knew no bounds. She heaped every manner of abuse upon her son and declared that she herself would turn him over to the authorities. She would rather see him locked away in prison than free to commit further crimes.

"Save me, Mother!" the miserable wretch pleaded, drenched in a cold sweat.

"No, no, no! A thousand times no! Even if I were to beggar myself completely to save you, you would simply go back to your old ways, forging more signatures or committing some other crime. To prison with you, you scoundrel! To prison! It is your destiny." Driven mad with fury by this terrible invocation, Pietro lunged at the implacable old woman and, seizing her by the neck with both hands, hurled her to the ground.

"Murderer!" the mother murmured, her voice stifled. "Matricide!"

And she spoke no more, for Pietro Tagliacozzo's hands had turned into a vise—squeezing, squeezing relentlessly, squeezing convulsively.

When the young man regained a glimmer of reason and released his victim's neck, the poor old woman lay dead and rigid.

Realizing what he had done, Pietro Tagliacozzo fled in horror from the scene of his crime and wandered all night like a madman through the countryside surrounding Olevano. At the break of dawn,

he was picked up by a patrolling squad; delirious, he immediately confessed to the horrific deed. They were forced to place him in a straitjacket, as he made repeated attempts to take his own life. Pietro Tagliacozzo's remorse was commensurate with the enormity of his crime. Sentenced to the supreme penalty, he solemnly declared that he had deserved it; he thanked his judges and implored them to expedite his execution.

The execution took place—at my own hands—on January 19, 1842, in Rome (where he had been transferred), on Via de' Cerchi. His contrition, the evident anguish of soul he endured, and the courage with which he nonetheless walked to the gallows—accompanied by his confessor and the comforting friars—stirred a sense of profound pity.

Lalla had the audacity to watch the proceedings from a window; however, upon being recognized by a bystander and singled out by the crowd, she provoked their indignation, which erupted into a torrent of curses and threats, for which reasons she was forced to withdraw and go into hiding. The very next day, a decree from the public prosecutor expelled her from Rome.

Chapter LXXXII

Cesare Abbo was endowed by nature with an extremely licentious temperament. Born into a wealthy family of impeccable lineage, one that enjoyed high standing within the finest circles of society, he had, at a very young age, surrendered himself to every excess. He squandered his fortune on gambling, gluttony, and debauchery of every kind, strewing the path of his life with the unhappy victims of his insatiable lust.

Not a single woman could cross his path without his attempting to make her his own, whether through violence or seduction. He would take her by surprise, forcibly bending her to his will whenever the opportunity arose; or else he would deceive her with false declarations of love, or win her over with gold (which he scattered with open hands) if he could not otherwise gain possession of her. In a word, he knew no obstacles. Whenever he encountered difficulties, his desires only intensified, becoming utterly irresistible; and to satisfy them, he would stop at nothing.

Tall and well-proportioned, endowed with Herculean vigor, with a broad, erect chest, a bold and provocative gaze, and an exquisitely sensual mouth, Cesare Abbo exuded and inhaled sensuality through every pore, and he frequently found himself the object of female attraction. Yet no passion ever lasted long within him. Drained by the pleasures of a single night, he was capable of abandoning—even casting aside—the very next day the unwary woman for whom he had committed the wildest follies just hours before. His escapades were on everyone's lips, particularly among circles of the less scrupulous sort, and served as a perennial source of ribald jokes and erotic banter. He was spoken of as a Don Juan of the very worst kind.

It was rumored that, one night at a hotel, he had surprised a lady who was staying alone, breaking through the connecting door from his own room into hers to gain entry. The lady had attempted to call for help, but he had gagged her; and, unable to win her over by persuasion to satisfy his whim, he took her by force. After obscenely abusing her until dawn—and not knowing how to escape the consequences of his crime—he bound her hands and feet to the bed using towels. Then, donning the lady's clothes and pulling down the thick veil of the hat she had been wearing to conceal his face, he fled, leaving her in that terrible predicament. When the servants entered the unfortunate woman's room and freed her, Cesare Abbo had already left the city, and there was no way to track him down.

On another occasion, having been entrusted by a friend to convey news to his wife, he went to her home to carry out the errand and was received by the lady with the utmost courtesy. But the exquisite charms of that young and beautiful woman enchanted him, dazzled him, and made his head spin. Suddenly, he abruptly cut short their conversation and, seizing her fair hand, spoke to her with an indescribable intensity:

"Sofia!"

The lady, stunned, tried to withdraw her hand, but Cesare held it fast and pressed his suit.

"Sofia, I love you."

"Sir," the lady replied indignantly, "you forget where you are and to whom you are speaking."

"I find myself beside an angel, and I am speaking to the dearest, most beautiful, and most captivating of women."

"These words, which I would have rejected at any moment you might have uttered them, are now an insult to me. Remember that you are here by virtue of a letter from my husband: a friend of yours, who placed his trust in your loyalty."

"Words, words, Sofia—useless words. Love is a flame that flares up in an instant, or it is nothing at all."

"I reject this love—which I choose to regard as a momentary aberration."

"The true aberration would be for us not to seize the joys promised by this chance encounter. Perhaps, at this very moment, your husband is doing with another woman exactly what I long to do with you. Let us love one another, Sofia. An hour of oblivion and rapture is worth more than twenty years of happiness calculated, sanctioned, and legitimized by that absurdity known as marriage."

Terrified by this insolent language, the lady stands perplexed. She wishes to avoid a scandal and attempts to gently persuade the audacious man to desist from his insane designs.

"I simply cannot fathom," she tells him, "this madness that has seized you. It is a misfortune for me to have awakened in you feelings that I cannot share, feelings I must not encourage."

"Why?"

"Have you, then, forgotten my station? Even if a faint spark of sympathy rendered me less impervious to your declarations, I would still be compelled to reject them by your singular audacity."

"Nonsense! Such childishness is unworthy of a divine beauty such as yourself."

"I implore you, sir, to alter your tone. A gentleman demeans himself when he disregards the proprieties."

"But I love you, Sofia! I love you as I have never loved before. For a single kiss from you, I would give my life—not once, but ten times over! Insult me, trample upon me, despise me afterward if you must, but *be mine*!"

As he speaks these words, Cesare Abbo lunges at the lady; he encircles her waist with one arm and, tilting her head back with the other, kisses her furiously upon the lips and throat, attempting to force himself upon her.

Faced with such an assault—and realizing she is all but lost—the lady feigns submission to her attacker for a fleeting second; this causes him to relax the intensity of his embrace, allowing her to break free and grasp the pull-cord of a bell, which she yanks with tremendous force. Two liveried servants rush in immediately from the anteroom.

"Remove this gentleman at once, and bear in mind: he is never to be granted admittance to this house again."

The two servants close in on Cesare, but he attempts to fight them off. But he has to deal with two very sturdy young men, who, after a brief scuffle, manage to take him out.

Chapter LXXXIII

The insult he had suffered served only to heighten the passion Sofia had ignited in Cesare Abbo. He swore to himself that he would possess that woman, even if it cost him his life—and he kept his vow. One April night, returning from an evening out, Sofia instructed the coachman—whom she had hired only a few days earlier—to take her for a drive outside Porta San Giovanni. She was more restless than usual, and weary; she wished to savor the cool, fragrant breezes of spring. The ball had somewhat stirred her senses, and she hoped that this excursion would help her regain her composure.

Reclining against the cushions of the elegant carriage, she had cast aside her small white cashmere mantle—embroidered with gold and lined with sky-blue silk—and, with her opulent shoulders and beautiful, bare arms exposed, she reveled in the faint shivers that the night air, drifting in through one of the lowered windows, sent through her. Her imagination, immersed in the memories of the evening, wandered freely; she was lost in a daydream. But as the chill grew sharper, she decided she should have the window raised. She called out to the coachman and said:

"I am cold. Step down, close the door securely, and let us head back."

The coachman stepped down, opened the carriage door, and beheld a captivating sight: a woman clad in little more than lace and silk. Instantly inflamed with amorous fervor, he reached out his arms and pulled her toward him. Sofia struggled to break free and push him away, but his grip was too powerful.

"This time, you won't have your servants throw me out like you did six months ago!" the attacker sneered.

"You? Is that you?" the voluptuous woman exclaimed, more astonished than indignant.

"It is I, Cesare Abbo! Escape me now, if you can. You shall be truly mine."

Sofia’s resistance was feeble, if not entirely nonexistent. The woman’s pathological state was ripe for such a perilous escapade. If it is true that all women have moments when they belong to whoever simply takes them, then this must surely have been one of hers. Sofia’s kisses were no less numerous, nor less ardent, than those of her audacious assailant, who had disguised himself as a coachman by bribing the lady’s actual driver to achieve his aim. Sofia reveled in being the victim of a suitor from her own social class, rather than the object of a servant’s brutality. Moreover, the passion she had inspired flattered her vanity. Abbo’s amorous prowess worked a miracle. Upon returning to her

palazzo, she was madly infatuated with her enterprising lover; she regretted the haughtiness that had robbed her of six months of pleasure, and she vowed to make up for it with interest.

Upon reaching their prearranged rendezvous, Cesare Abbo handed the gold-braided hat and heavy livery greatcoat back to the rightful coachman and bade Sofia farewell. The very next day, she awaited him impatiently in her private boudoir. But Cesare Abbo did not appear… nor was he ever seen again. His whim had run its course.

When a passion is denied its full physical expression within a woman's senses, she suffers horribly; her character becomes warped, and she is easily driven to surrender herself to the most monstrous excesses. Such was the fate of Sofia: having lost the *faux* coachman, she gave herself over to the real one, for he reminded her of that night of pleasure, at once acrid and delicious. Gradually, she descended through every stage of depravity, until she reached the point of visiting public brothels in disguise—much like Messalina[xxxi]—to revel in the thrill of the sudden and the unknown. There she met Cesare Abbo once again, and after spending a night with him in that infamous house, she returned home and killed herself with a pistol shot to the heart.

Chapter LXXXIV

Compromised by a series of sordid deeds, Cesare Abbo was forced to flee Rome and the Papal States to avoid even graver consequences. After spending a few years sojourning in various Italian cities, he moved abroad and eventually settled in Paris; there, having squandered the very last remnants of his fortune, he was compelled to rely on his education and turn his knowledge to profit simply to survive. Hired as a private tutor in a noble household, he became the lover of the lady of the house—a woman in her forties who remained fresh and comely—and received from her an abundance of financial support. He could have lived a life of peace and contentment, but his insatiable thirst for ever-novel pleasures ultimately led him to ruin. He taught Italian and music to his mistress's fifteen-year-old daughter—a most graceful creature, rosy-cheeked and fair-haired as a cherub—and became infatuated with her. Realizing he could not hope to seduce her, he administered an intoxicating draught to her while escorting her to a country villa, where he then violated her. The girl became pregnant as a result, and Cesare Abbo was forced to leave not only the household but Paris itself.

Having taken refuge in Liège, he secured a position as a professor at a Catholic college; there, he corrupted a number of the boys entrusted to his care, thereby igniting a grave scandal and triggering a criminal investigation, one from which he would not have emerged unscathed had it not been for the intervention of his family, who managed to hush the matter up.

In the interim, a nephew of his (descended through the female line) had been invested with the sacred purple; this nephew now exerted the full weight of his influence in his uncle's favor. Many years had passed since those events, and the memory of Cesare Abbo's misdeeds had faded in Rome. The Cardinal, having made the necessary inquiries, decided to summon his uncle back to his side and extended the invitation to him by letter.

For the lecherous, wandering rake, the offer could not have been more flattering or advantageous. He saw a new horizon opening before him and vowed to take full advantage of all the delightful prospects it presented. He requested—and obtained—permission to enter holy orders; and, brushing aside all difficulties at his nephew's behest and overcoming every obstacle, he was ordained a priest within a remarkably short time. In doing so, he exchanged his name Cesare—which had become far too compromised—for that of Domenico: a name that, fortunately, could be found among the long string of names bestowed upon him at the baptismal font.

Don Domenico—for so we must now call him—made his solemn entry into his native city clad in a cassock, clean-shaven, and impeccable in his bearing; indeed, one would have struggled to recognize in him the former libertine who had provided such ample fodder for the scandalous chronicles of the lands he had visited. He was still in the prime of life; approaching forty, yet he looked fifteen years younger: so robust, fresh-faced, and full of vigor did he appear.

The Cardinal was greatly surprised to find himself facing an uncle who appeared younger than he did, even though the Cardinal himself was the youngest member of the Sacred College, having been invested with the cardinalatial purple by His Holiness Gregory XVI in recognition of his profound erudition. Nevertheless, captivated by the new priest's exquisitely refined manners, he judged that his presence would lend luster to his court and, accordingly, extended to him the warmest of welcomes.

"Don Domenico, I am truly delighted to see you. I have long desired to make your acquaintance; my only regret is that I owe this good fortune to circumstances upon which—for the moment—I choose not to dwell, confident as I am that you will know how to honor the habit and the sacred office you have assumed."

"Cardinal, my dearest nephew: the fangs of slander have bitten me often; yet now, beneath the aegis of your purple, I trust they will henceforth leave me in peace. You have performed a deed worthy of both your family and mine—families bound together in interests and affection through marriage—by calling me back to Rome."

"You shall become part of my household. I appoint you my Honorary Secretary; you will fulfill the duties of Master of Ceremonies, a role for which you seem perfectly suited."

"The office pleases me; it flatters my vanity, and I accept it. However, as I intend to exercise my priestly ministry in earnest—a vocation toward which I have always felt drawn—I should like to be entrusted with the care of souls."

"Your past... well…"

"Yet I have gained an exceptional practical knowledge of the human condition."

"I do not doubt it. Nevertheless, you would be exposing yourself to fresh temptations, temptations from which I deem it prudent to keep you safely removed."

"Cardinal, bear with me. I am deeply grateful for your benevolence toward me, and for all that you have done on my behalf; yet, now that I have become a priest, I have no desire to be one merely for show."

The uncle's obstinacy somewhat irritated the illustrious Prince of the Church. He suspected ulterior motives behind Don Domenico's tenacious resolve, and felt a twinge of regret for having recalled him. Yet, realizing that it would not be easy to persuade him to renounce his aspirations, he found himself compelled to assent. After all, the cure of souls he sought would keep him away from greater dangers and safeguard the decorum of his Court.

"You are absolutely determined, then, to exercise the priesthood in all its most exacting duties?" he asked.

"I desire it, Your Eminence."

"So be it. You shall have the ministry of the confessional, for now."

"That suffices me."

"Later on, we shall see whether it be fitting to appoint you titular head of a parish."

"I do not push my aspirations quite so far."

"It is agreed, then, that you shall reside here at the palace and be considered part of the household. You will find it easy to acquaint yourself with, and gain practice in, the ceremonial protocol. *Errare humanum est*: you have, if rumor does not lie, stumbled in the playing of your part. Take great care not to fall back into your old ways, nor to offer fresh opportunity for that venomous tooth of slander—whose bites you claim to have already felt—to sink itself into you once more. Be cautious, at the very least…"

"...If not chaste. That goes without saying."

Following this conversation, uncle and nephew parted on the best of terms.

That very day, Don Domenico took possession of his small, elegant apartment within the Cardinal's palace; rubbing his hands together gleefully, he exclaimed:

"I have found my way back to the Land of Cuccagna[xxxii]! Now, I must just take care not to get myself exiled again."

Chapter LXXXV

For a considerable time, Domenico Abbo maintained a most austere demeanor and an irreproachable conduct. His nephew, the Cardinal, was edified by this and never ceased to congratulate himself on the decision he had made. The affability of his manners and the cheerfulness of his spirit won him everyone's affection. Never had the prelate's antechambers been so crowded with visitors from the highest echelons of society. Ladies were in the majority, and they conversed with greater pleasure with the master of ceremonies Domenico than with the Cardinal himself. That handsome priest with the imposing stature of a grenadier, flashing dark eyes, and a wide, sensual mouth still graced with strong, pearly-white teeth held a powerful attraction for them. And from the Cardinal's palace, they would willingly proceed to the church where Don Domenico officiated, there to approach the tribunal of penance over which he presided.

Before long, Abbo had become the spiritual director for a great number of patrician families; he was welcomed with extraordinary fanfare whenever he deigned to accept an invitation to dinner or to a social reception.

The joviality of his character made him a delightful dinner companion, and a highly competent advisor on all matters concerning worldly life, no less than on those regarding the life celestial.

The Cardinal-nephew felt no jealousy over his uncle's successes: successes that, after all, reflected favorably upon himself; indeed, he made haste to present him to the Pope as soon as word reached him that His Holiness desired to make his acquaintance.

Pope Gregory XVI, finding respite from the weighty cares of governing both Church and State, and from the afflictions inflicted upon him by conspirators and revolutionaries forever plotting new schemes to subvert the political and social order, was a man of cheerful and playful disposition; he was fond of the bottle and of amusing anecdotes. Indeed, an endless number of stories are told about him. I recall two anecdotes that serve wonderfully to explain the deference he later showed toward Don Domenico Abbo:

Ganganelli had recently appointed a new private secretary, who slept in the room adjoining the Pope's bedchamber so as to be ready to attend to his every request. One night, the secretary thought he heard the Pope speaking. He rose from his bed and approached the door to better distinguish His Holiness's voice. Suddenly, he heard Pope Gregory XVI say:

"My little blonde, give me a little kiss."

The secretary was utterly astonished, if not scandalized. By what route, he wondered, had this "little blonde" gained access to brighten His Holiness's nocturnal hours? What mystery lay concealed beneath such intimate familiarity?

The following day, the inquisitive secretary did his utmost to sound out the situation, but he failed to uncover a single clue. That night, he once again eavesdropped at the door of the Pontiff's bedchamber, and at one point, he heard him repeat the entreaty:

"My little blonde, give me a little kiss."

This continued for many nights, without the secretary's ever-growing curiosity finding any satisfaction. The only change was that the requests for kisses became increasingly frequent throughout the course of the night itself.

Finally, one night—after the Pope had requested even more kisses than usual from his "little blonde"—the secretary heard a muffled thud, cushioned by the carpet. Judging it necessary to intervene, he entered the Pope's room, albeit unbidden.

A strange sight met his eager gaze.

Gregory XVI was huddled beside his bed, clad only in his nightshirt, a bottle of amber-hued *Vin Santo*[xxxiii] clutched in his hand; try as he might, he was utterly unable to rise to his feet. Several other bottles lay abandoned on the floor around him. The news, leaking from the Vatican's secret inner chambers, spread throughout Rome, sparking universal hilarity; consequently, the curious and garrulous Secretary was dismissed. The other anecdote is as follows:

One afternoon, several cardinals were gathered around His Holiness, conversing on various topics.

As the conversation turned to Pope Gregory I, one cardinal—less prudent and less astute than the others—began to lavish praise upon the Pontiff's virtues, both real and supposed, extolling them beyond all measure; he concluded by declaring that Gregory had deservedly gone down in history bearing the title of "Gregory the Great."

Ganganelli, who found such extravagant encomiums somewhat grating, summoned a valet and ordered him to fetch a bottle of *Lacryma Christi*[xxxiv]. Pouring himself a brimming goblet, he drained it in a single draught, then delivered this pronouncement:

"Gregory I went down in history bearing the title of 'Gregory the Great'; Gregory XVI shall go down in history bearing the title of 'Gregory the Drinker.'"

Don Domenico Abbo was graciously received by the Supreme Pontiff, before whom he managed to display a shrewdly cheerful demeanor without ever transgressing the bounds of becoming reserved; this conduct served to restore him to His Holiness's good graces.

Chapter LXXXVI

The favors bestowed by Gregory XVI, combined with those of his Cardinal-nephew, proved the undoing of the aging libertine. Emboldened by his position, he no longer took the slightest care to conceal his intrigues with his beautiful female penitents. Sumptuous luncheons and Lucullan banquets increasingly inflamed his senses; one act of lechery followed another, eventually degenerating into indescribable obscenities. Wives and spinsters alike could no longer sate his shameless lust; he began trawling through the history of Greek, Assyrian, and Babylonian prostitution to unearth the most infamous rites with which to satisfy his filthy cravings. Specialized procurers supplied him with tender young boys, upon whom he branded the mark of his lust, constantly devising new forms of enticement to reawaken his senses, and to sharpen them whenever they seemed to grow dull.

Within the very walls of the Cardinal's palace, he reenacted the Neronian orgies of Capri and Baiae; he went so far as to drive pins into the flesh of the young victims who submitted to his lubricious desires, seeking to derive a more intense pleasure from the involuntary spasms triggered by the agony of those cruel punctures.

Meanwhile, news of such dissolute behavior spread throughout Rome, arousing the indignation of its citizens. In the upper echelons of society, however, people were more indulgent and tolerant. Yet, as time went on, and the scandal grew ever more grave, it became necessary to draw the Cardinal's attention to the matter, so that he might take measures to put an end to it. Consequently, the Cardinal repeatedly admonished his uncle, urging him to return to a temperate and quiet life… at least in outward appearance.

At first, Don Domenico Abbo offered his apologies; he claimed to be, once again, the victim of slanderous envy on the part of his detractors, and promised to give them no further pretext for complaint. But then, growing ever bolder from his successes, he answered his nephew arrogantly; he reminded him of the turpitudes of the Medici and Farnese families, and concluded that the Holy Church —if it could endure the indignity of a eunuch cardinal such as himself—had every right to be compensated by that cardinal's uncle, a man capable of making up for his deficiencies. The Cardinal now deemed it necessary to rid himself of this filthy priest, who so ignominiously dishonored both his sacred office and the household that sheltered him; he resolved to catch him in the act, thereby justifying the severe measures he had devised to take against him.

Having been alerted one night that one of the usual orgies was scheduled to take place in his uncle's apartments, he decided to attend it and to swoop down upon Domenico Abbo at the opportune moment, to cast him out of the palace just as Our Lord Jesus Christ had cast the merchants out of the Temple.

The sybarite was dining merrily in the company of two harlots, already half-inebriated, when the Cardinal appeared in the doorway of the salon.

"Welcome, my nephew!" Abbo rose to say the moment he saw him, without betraying the slightest perturbation. "There is plenty here for you, too. We have truffles from Périgord, potent enough to restore vigor to a corpse. This wine, pressed from grapes gilded by the sun of Champagne, will infuse you with a spirit both merry and sparkling. These two Magdalenes—not yet converted, and whom I hope will have the good taste never to convert—would have been enough to quell the carnal rebellions of even the hermit Saint Anthony. I place all this at your disposal, Your Eminence, in the hope that you will do me the honor of sitting at my table, just as I sit daily at yours. Come, come, Cardinal-Nephew. I know you enjoy a reputation for unblemished purity, but this experience will do you no harm. There is always time to sin—just as there is always time to make an act of contrition."

The Cardinal was dumbfounded by such audacity. He would have liked to withdraw, to avoid a distasteful scene. But now, it was too late. He decided it would be prudent to appear mild-mannered for the moment, and said:

"Don Domenico, I need to speak with you."

"At once, Your Eminence. Please, come in."

"I must speak with you regarding matters that do not require the presence of witnesses."

"As you wish."

"Dismiss those... ladies."

"Most willingly. I am a well-mannered man. You shall see."

And so saying, he tossed a purse of scudi to the two women, who promptly rose from the table, adjusted their disheveled garments, and, throwing their cloaks over their shoulders, headed for the door.

"Giacomo! Giacomo!" cried the priest; and instantly, a young, beardless servant who served as his catamite[xxxv] appeared.

"Escort these ladies," he said, "and do not return. You are free for the night."

As soon as the women and the lad had departed, the Abbot rose, advanced toward the Cardinal, and—taking him by the hand and compelling him to approach the still-laden table—said to him with an ironic air:

"Here we are, alone, Your Eminence; now you need no longer fear that your modesty will suffer any offense. Be seated."

The Cardinal—stern, yet not scowling, for he had resolved to avoid any scene—complied with the invitation and spoke slowly:

"Do you consider it tolerable, Don Domenico, these scenes to which you subject me within the palace of a Prince of the Church?"

"Worse have been witnessed."

"Other times, other customs."

"All times are good for enjoying life; it is so brief."

"I have already admonished you so many times regarding the fulfillment of your duties."

"In what way have I ever failed, Your Eminence?"

"And you dare to ask?"

"Certainly I dare, seeing as I know that I have always, and with the utmost scruple, discharged the duties entrusted to me."

"That is not the point."

"Then what is?"

"Your character as a priest, by God!"

"Your Eminence, you are ill-informed regarding me. My confessional is the most frequented in Rome; indeed, the most beautiful ladies—those most distinguished by wealth and birth—vie with one another to have me as their spiritual director, their guide upon the thorny path of life."

"Do not mix the sacred with the profane!" the prelate pronounced, seeking to avoid a direct answer.

"When I proclaim the Word of God from the pulpit, the people flock to the church. I am summoned to every home where there is a need to pour the balm of consolation upon troubled souls. Often, I am compelled to forsake your table to hasten to the tables of other Princes of the Church. What is more? His Holiness looks upon me with favor."

"With such favor, in fact, that it was precisely he who urged me to rid myself of you."

"To rid yourself of *me*?"

"Precisely."

"Ah! You drunken Pope, is this how you repay my pleasantries? Oh, but he shall hear from me!"

"You would be wise to refrain from going to see His Holiness."

"I most certainly shall go. Every subject has the right to appeal to his legitimate sovereign."

"You will not go, for you would be arrested *ipso facto*."

"That would not be the first time, truly."

"I am pleased that you remember that."

"As am I; for it reminds me of your kindness, Your Eminence."

Deceived by these words, which seemed sincere, the Cardinal believed he could proceed further with a clear conscience, and resumed:

"You will leave this palace tomorrow."

"You are the master; I shall obey you."

"And you will retire to the Dominican convent, there to spend six months in penance."

"Now *that* I shall not do."

"Such are the orders of His Holiness."

Don Domenico Abbo poured himself a goblet of sparkling Champagne and sipped it slowly; then, wiping his lips, he exclaimed:

"Exquisite! I wager that if Pope Gregory XVI were here, he would not refuse a glass; unlike you, my overly rigid nephew."

"Do you imagine you could make me a witness to your orgies?"

"My nephew, forgive me, but I did not summon you, and I could have done quite well without your company, for I already had other company, as you saw; if not more interesting, then certainly sweeter."

"Shame on you!"

"For what? For following the laws of nature? Never! Let him be the one to feel shame, who presumes to contradict them."

"I am not here to engage in vain and idle arguments, but rather to deliver to you the orders of the Supreme Pontiff."

"I couldn't care less about him or his messengers. Tell him that I perform my spiritual and bodily exercises within the privacy of my own home."

"This is not your home; have you forgotten that?"

"No—and tomorrow, at dawn, I shall depart. I shall pitch my tents in a place where there are no meddlers who, abusing their rank, come to disturb my diversions and my pleasures."

Chapter LXXXVII

At this outburst from his lecherous uncle, the Cardinal was seized by violent rage. Don Domenico had truly exhausted his patience.

"You shall never leave this place again," he thundered in a deep, solemn voice.

"And why, pray tell?"

"You shall not leave except under escort by the constabulary, who will take you to the dungeons to be judged and punished for all the iniquities you have committed, both past and present."

"That would take far too long. The world would end before the trial was concluded."

"Your cynicism is a match for your deeds."

"They could be traded on the stock exchange."

"Do you imagine that your depravities, your seductions, your corruption of minors, and your rapes go unknown?"

"Oh, the delights! Do not remind me of them, Your Eminence, for you make my mouth water."

"You vile, filthy creature, unworthy of possessing a human soul! Is this how one speaks in the presence of a man of the purple, a member of the Sacred College, a Prince of the Church?"

"A Prince of the Church... a man of the purple... a Cardinal...! Oh, what a beautiful, splendid idea has just struck me! Among the many whims I have indulged, this is the one that was missing. The opportunity could not be more perfect."

The Cardinal listened to him, failing to grasp the meaning of his words... and began to suspect that the man was in the throes of alcoholic delirium. He was still deliberating on the proper course of action when he felt himself seized around the waist by the powerful arms of the obscene priest and flung face-down onto a sofa at the far end of the drawing room. Believing that the man intended to kill him—and seized by an overwhelming terror—he murmured in a strangled voice:

"My life! My life! Spare my life!"

"It is something far other than your life that I want from you, my nephew. It is not every day one gets to taste the flesh of a Cardinal." And without further ado, he set about inflicting upon him the ultimate outrage.

The wretched man attempted to resist. But Abbo, pinning him fast between his knees, seized him by the throat with both hands, nor did he release him until he had completed the heinous deed.

The Cardinal's body then fell face-down upon the floor. He had died of suffocation.

Coming to his senses before the corpse of his nephew, Domenico Abbo was seized by a terrible dread. He grasped the full gravity of the situation in an instant. Realizing that escape was impossible for him, and seeking to evade the inevitable gallows that awaited him, he resolved to throw himself into the river. He fled the accursed drawing room and rushed madly down the palace stairs. Some servants gave chase, while others ascended to his private quarters; there, upon discovering the body of the murdered Cardinal, they raised the alarm throughout the building.

As the dissolute priest reached the Ponte Sant'Angelo, still pursued by the servants, he attempted to clamber onto the parapet to hurl himself into the water, but was seized by several soldiers and restrained. Meanwhile, the first and second groups of servants, now apprised of the crime, began to arrive. Domenico Abbo was taken to Castel Sant'Angelo and confined within its dungeons.

The trial was conducted in secret and expedited with haste, as the authorities were anxious to avert a massive public scandal. In the meantime, a rumor had been circulated that the Cardinal had died of sudden syncope, and the servants were strictly enjoined from speaking of the matter. Yet much idle chatter had already ensued, and the truth was beginning to leak out to the public.

On the night of October 3rd to 4th, 1849, I was summoned to the fortress of Castel Sant'Angelo; there, at the break of dawn, I severed the head of the dissolute priest. Domenico Abbo had been stripped of his priestly vestments; the fingertips with which he had so often administered the Sacred Host had been scraped, as had his tonsure, in a ritual of deconsecration. He had cynically confessed to all his obscenities, even boasting of them and going into the most minute details. Exhorted to perform an act of contrition in order to merit divine grace, he replied with a sneer:

"I have enjoyed a cardinal; I hope to have good fortune with the Devil as well. Let me go to hell."

He requested, and was granted, permission to be neither blindfolded nor bound. He walked undaunted and with a steady stride from the prison to the spot where the scaffold had been erected; smiling, he gazed at the gallows and offered his head to the blade, having first exclaimed:

"It is all over."

Chapter LXXXVIII

On September 25, 1852, in the public square of Spoleto, I beheaded Pietro Giammarese—known as "Cascotta of Terni"—a resident of San Gemini (Terni district, Spoleto delegation), who stood guilty of numerous highway robberies and murders. On August 20, 1853, on the square by the bridge in Rieti, I severed the head of Sebastiano Proietti, aged 25, who had likewise been condemned to the supreme penalty for highway robbery and theft. His death was truly edifying. He made a sincere confession of his misdeeds and showed himself to be deeply penitent. He requested to attend Holy Mass and receive the Eucharist before setting out for his execution. Along the route from the prison to the square, he continued to pray aloud in the company of the spiritual comforters. He ascended the scaffold singing the Litany of Loreto and died like a saint.

On September 10 of that same year, I carried out a double execution in the Piazza della Madonna dei Cerchi, involving Giacomo Biacetti (son of the late Carlo), a 26-year-old Roman sieve-maker, and Andrea Leveri (son of the living Antonio), a 28-year-old Roman cowherd; both were guilty of highway robbery, aggravated theft, and murder. Both men walked toward their execution in high spirits, humming tunes as if they were on their way to a wedding. Upon reaching the guillotine, they gazed at it with smiles. Leveri remarked:

"Quickly, Mastro Titta: take my hide, and my father will see to tanning it later."

"Commend mine to him as well," added Biacetti.

Their utter indifference to death stirred the admiration of all the hardened criminals witnessing the execution, who were heard to say: "That is how true Romans die."

On October 8th—less than a month later—I found myself in Viterbo for a triple execution: two men—Vincenzo Iancoli from Ronciglione and Francesco Valentini from Letera—and a woman, Francesca Levante (widow Ferruccini), who had meticulously plotted a murder for the purpose of robbery.

Ferruccini was a beautiful woman who had traveled the world and turned her hand to all manner of trades: most notably, that of a stage dancer. Having fallen in love with Valentini, she had followed him to Viterbo, where they lived as best they could. But before long, the hardships grew tiresome for them both, and Francesca decided to capitalize on her beauty with the full consent of her lover, who took a share of the earnings from her prostitution.

A French gentleman, a former army officer, had recently settled in the outskirts of Viterbo, taking up residence in an elegant little villa. It appeared he had suffered some grave personal sorrows involving women back in his home country, and had come there to enjoy a measure of peace and tranquility, perhaps even to escape the threat of some potential act of vengeance. He was familiar with the area, having been stationed there during his military service, and felt that no retreat could suit him better than this one. One day in Viterbo, he spotted Francesca—whom he recognized from her days as a professional dancer—and approached her, striking up a conversation:

"You? Here? How is this possible? I seem to recall seeing you on the stage."

"I was, indeed."

"And you've retired?"

"I'm here with my man." As she spoke, Francesca cast a piercing glance at the young stranger, who leaned in close to her ear and whispered a mysterious word.

"Why not?" Levante replied.

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Are you free?"

"Completely."

"Your man?"

"Who cares about him?"

"Then I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll come. Prepare me a good dinner and some Champagne. I love Champagne, you know?"

Chapter LXXXIX

That very evening, just as the dancer had promised, she found herself in the elegant drawing room of the Frenchman's townhouse. They had dined sumptuously, and Champagne had flowed in abundance. Spirits ran high, and the amorous revelry was complete. There was but one whim Francesca refused to indulge: to perform one of her dance steps for him alone.

When entreated, she demurred, saying:

"I have been out of practice for too long; I am no longer good for anything." The foreigner pressed on, making the most lavish offers, yet La Levante persisted in her refusal.

The following morning, before bidding her farewell, the foreigner led Francesca before a strongbox and bestowed upon her a magnificent gift; then he said:

"Look: if you consent to my whim, I will give you as much of this gold as you desire."

Francesca fixed him with one of those gazes of hers—brimming with mysterious voluptuousness—and offered one of those lascivious smiles that seemed to bite right into the very marrow of one's bones.

"Very well, then; I shall indulge you once more."

"Immediately?"

"No, not immediately."

"Tomorrow?"

"That is too soon. The day after tomorrow."

The foreigner embraced her in token of his assent and dismissed her. The cunning minx had achieved her aim by postponing the gratification of the Frenchman's whim. First and foremost, she craved to give him time to restore his vigor; for—sensual creature that she was—she desired that their new amorous jousts take place under all those conditions of physical potency that her own insatiable nature demanded. Furthermore, the sight of that gold had dazzled her eyes and sparked within her the desire to seize it all for herself. No matter how much the Frenchman might choose to give her, it seemed to her that it would never be enough: she wanted the whole lot. Upon returning to her lover, Valentini, and showing him the gold she had received, she said:

"Look: this is but a thousandth part of what we could have, if only…"

"Is your Frenchman, then, very rich?"

"He showed me a strongbox filled with rolls of gold Napoleons."

"You extracted far too little from him, then."

"There is time."

"Must you return to him?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"You would do well to cultivate the relationship carefully."

"It would be better to take it all at once."

"I understand you. But how?"

"He has but a single servant; once he has prepared dinner, he takes his leave, as his master prefers to remain alone."

"And so?"

"You could come over; I would open the door for you."

"Alone?"

"Having a companion would be safer."

"I have just the man."

On the appointed day, Francesca made her way to the Frenchman's townhouse and was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the dissolute young man who, in order to enjoy the utmost freedom, had already dismissed his servant.

Francesco Valentini, accompanied by his friend Vincenzo Iancoli—upon whom he could rely implicitly—took up their positions nearby. Once the cold supper was finished, Francesca shed her street clothes and donned a *bayadère*[xxxvi] costume she had brought with her: a very simple outfit, consisting merely of a thin, transparent veil that allowed the full opulence of her magnificent figure to be glimpsed beneath—and began a bizarre dance, in the course of which she increasingly accentuated her provocative and lascivious movements.

The Frenchman, reclining upon an ottoman, followed her with avid eyes: eyes saturated with desire, yearning to clasp the voluptuous woman in his arms. And so it continued for a good part of the evening, until, utterly drained of strength, the foreigner succumbed to a deep, albeit restless, slumber.

Chapter XC

Levante was already inside the apartment, and they were just preparing to break open the strongbox (using the tools they had brought with them) when the Frenchman, whose sleep, as I observed, was restless, opened his eyes. He hesitated for a second, but the realization of the truth immediately struck him, and he sat up, ready to lunge at the thieves. He did not have the time. Francesca, following the instructions she had received, plunged the broad blade of a knife—with which she was armed—deep into his throat.

The Frenchman let out a scream; the two robbers immediately rushed to her side, snatched the knife, still dripping with blood, from Francesca's hand, and riddled him with wounds. Having completed their heinous deed and stolen all the money from the strongbox—the key to which they had found on the Frenchman—they departed calmly.

The following morning, the Frenchman's manservant, who possessed his own key to enter the building, discovered his master murdered and went to the police to report the horrific crime. The police proceeded to the scene to conduct an investigation, where they discovered the *bayadère* costume that Francesca, in her frantic haste to flee after committing the crime, had forgotten to take with her. After making inquiries, they learned of the night the former dancer had spent at the building three days earlier and decided to arrest her. Upon searching her home, they recovered all the stolen money. While the search was being carried out, Vincenzo Iancoli happened to arrive at the home of Valentini and Levante; he, too, was placed under arrest.

The trial did not drag on: the evidence was too conclusive, and the defendants—after offering some initial resistance—confessed. Only Francesca held out: she admitted to having spent the night with the Frenchman, but claimed she had been surprised by Valentini, who was jealous of him. That he, together with his accomplice, had murdered the young man, and subsequently broken open the strongbox and carried off the valuables, having threatened her with death should she speak. But her defense strategy came to naught, and she was sentenced, along with her accomplices, to be beheaded.

When October 8th arrived, the day of the execution, Iancoli and Valentini made their confessions and requested the consolations of religion. They were utterly undone by fear and were brought onto the scaffold more dead than alive; only Francesca Levante—the widow Ferruccini—showed herself to be courageous. She had insisted on wearing her finest clothes, as if she were bound

for a festive gathering rather than for death. She arranged her hair with great care and begged me, when I should present her severed head to the crowd, to take pains not to disfigure it. As the public watched her ascend the steps of the gallows undaunted: head held high, chest thrust out, gaze haughty, stride confident, hips swaying ever so slightly… cries of admiration escaped the crowd.

"How beautiful she is!" voices murmured on one side.

"What a pity to kill her!" others added from the other.

Francesca heard these remarks and was evidently gratified by them. She refused to be bound. And even as she offered her head to the instrument of death, she continued to adjust the folds of her gown.

Chapter XCI

Serafino Benfatti was a man of imposing stature, strong as a bull and prone to violent outbursts. To these qualities, he added that of being a spendthrift of the first order, a notorious reveler, and a libertine of the most extreme sort, a man for whom lawlessness was the only law. He had taken as his wife a graceful and gentle young woman from Perugia, whom he had met in Ancona, where she had traveled with her family to take the sea baths. As the head of a highly reputable trading house that kept several ships at sea, he had encountered no undue difficulty in winning her hand in marriage.

At first, Serafino appeared madly in love with his Cesarina, and she reciprocated his passion with all the fervor of which she was capable. Yet her reserved nature and delicate temperament did not allow for the transports of emotion, the wild impulses and frenzied displays, that her husband craved.

Consequently, Benfatti began to grow cold toward her, and within a short span of time, his wife became utterly loathsome to him. He then reverted to the life of dissipation he had first embarked upon following his father's death, when he had succeeded him as head of the firm. He dallied with women of every stripe, spending far more than his income allowed; to recoup his losses, he took to gambling recklessly and squandered enormous sums. Reduced to penury, he attempted to seize his wife's private fortune; however, she—sickened by his behavior—resisted with an energy of which no one would have thought her capable.

The result was a succession of violent, terrible scenes, filled with threats and physical abuse. Cesarina, weary of a life of ceaseless torment, turned to her family for help; bolstered by the support of an experienced attorney, they petitioned for—and successfully obtained—a legal separation. Serafino Benfatti appeared satisfied by this and offered not the slightest objection to his wife returning to Perugia to live with her relatives.

There was, however, a reason for this acquiescence: the wayward man had struck up a romantic liaison with Maria Rossetti, a young woman of a spirited, sanguine temperament that suited his own character far better. They were two exuberant physical natures that balanced and permeated one another.

Maria was no stranger to love—perhaps she was not even on her second romance—yet, despite surrendering herself completely to Benfatti, without restraint or reserve, she would hear nothing of moving in with him or living openly in concubinage, as he demanded.

"Come and live with me," he would often say amidst his transports of passion. "Make me completely happy; I need to have you by my side at every hour of the day and night."

"Impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"You know why."

"Say it."

"You are not free. You have a wife…"

"Who chose to separate from me."

"That does not cease to make her your wife."

"And you believe that is right?"

"It may not be right, but it is the reality. I can pity you, sympathize with you—even love you, as I truly do—and give myself to you unreservedly, just as I am doing now; but I cannot usurp the place that belongs to another woman."

"Who forbids you?"

"Society, first and foremost."

"And then?"

"My conscience. I detest that woman—so much so that I could kill her—but I cannot take her place while she still lives."

These words lodged themselves in Serafino Benfatti's mind and returned to him often; he seemed to hear the very sound of them, and in them, he sought counsel: an exhortation, an incitement to rid himself of Cesarina.

Meanwhile, his affairs were going from bad to worse. In a single year, he lost two ships along with their cargo, and his ruin was complete.

Nothing remained for him but to liquidate the little he had left and sign on to some merchant vessel.

And that is precisely what he decided to do.

Chapter XCII

One evening, Serafino Benfatti appeared before Maria Rossetti, dressed in a sailor's uniform.

"What strange whim has seized you?" she asked him, opening her arms to him and then holding him tightly against her breast.

"It is no whim; it is a fact," the sailor replied.

"Explain yourself; I do not understand."

"I am ruined."

"That is not the first time you have told me so."

"When I told you before, ruin was merely a prospect; now, it is complete. I have settled my accounts: I am no longer a shipowner, no longer a merchant. All that remains to me now is my wits, backed by my own two hands and a few thousand lire."

"Well?"

"I have come to say goodbye. I am shipping out; I am bound for the New World to try my luck. If fortune smiles upon me, I shall return; if it remains against me, we shall never see one another again."

At these words, seized by a sudden surge of affection, Maria threw her arms around his neck and, dissolving into tears, let out a cry of heart-rending anguish:

"Impossible! Impossible! It would be the death of me."

"Then come with me."

"Come with you? But how?"

"I am signing on as a boatswain; you can come aboard as a passenger, paying for your passage. Once we reach America—Buenos Aires—we will settle there. The money I have left is more than enough to start a small business venture. Before long, I will rebuild my fortune, and…"

"And then?"

"We will be together and happy forever."

"That is not enough—you know it, Serafino. There is an insurmountable obstacle: your wife, Cesarina…"

"Do not remind me of her, Maria, for dark thoughts regarding her have been running through my mind for some time now."

Rossetti, instead of pulling away from him, drew closer and held him tight in her arms once more, whispering in his ear:

"What ideas?"

"Don't ask me."

"Do you have secrets from me? You don't love me."

"I love you… enough to conceive the plan for a crime."

"That is exactly how I want to be loved."

The incitement could not have been more direct or precise. Yet Serafino Benfatti still hesitated; he was afraid of misunderstanding, afraid that by revealing his grim intent, he might fill the woman he adored with horror.

"Well?" asked Maria.

"When an obstacle is insurmountable—invincible—one must…"

"Eliminate it."

"You said it yourself. I leave for Perugia this very night."

"I'm coming with you."

"What?" the sailor exclaimed, terrified. "You, follow me?"

"If there is danger, I want to share it with you."

"What if my courage failed me at the last moment?"

"I would strike the blow myself."

And with a kiss, they sealed the infamous pact that was to bind them for life. A kiss of death.

Cesarina had gone out for a stroll when her husband came to seek her. Dusk was falling, and he had slipped into the garden (from where he intended to steal into his wife's apartment the moment she returned) and lay in wait to perpetrate the crime under cover of night.

Maria Rossetti was waiting for him outside; she, too, would have liked to enter the garden and the house, but Serafino had objected, fearing she might prove more of a hindrance than a help. Cesarina did not take long to return, and she returned alone. She entered through the small gate in the garden fence and proceeded into the first room of her ground-floor apartment, which opened directly onto the garden. Serafino Benfatti followed her. The moment could not have been more opportune: everything seemed to conspire toward the successful outcome of their wicked enterprise.

But just as her husband was entering behind her, Cesarina, who had already passed into the second room, stepped back out and found herself face-to-face with Serafino. Raising the knife with

which he was armed, he brought it crashing down into her chest, striking toward the heart. The wretched woman let out a scream:

"Murderer!"

And she fell backward to the ground.

Serafino Benfatti, seized by an overwhelming terror, fled toward the garden, still brandishing the blood-stained knife.

There, he stumbled upon Maria, who had just passed through the gate. At that very moment, he saw Cesarina rise up in the doorway of the apartment; wounded only slightly—for the stays of her corset had deflected the blade—she had struggled to her feet and was now pursuing her husband, whom she had recognized.

Maria Rossetti assessed the situation and realized that she must take Serafino's place. In a flash, she snatched the weapon from Benfatti—who was stumbling toward her, mad with terror—and, lunging at her lover's wife, she riddled her with wounds: in the face, in the throat, wherever she could manage to strike.

The scent of blood filled her with a kind of frenzy. Nor did she release her victim until she heard the screams of Serafino and their relatives, who were returning just in time to witness the horrific spectacle. Maria Rossetti and Serafino Benfatti were immediately arrested. The man confessed to the crime in every detail, attempting to cast the greater part of the responsibility upon his mistress, by whom, he claimed, he had been incited to commit the misdeed.

Both were sentenced to decapitation, yet they faced their execution in vastly different ways. Serafino Benfatti appeared repentant and contrite for the crime he had committed; he made his confession and received Communion with exemplary piety, proceeding to the scaffold comforted by the friars, and invoking the forgiveness of both God and man. Maria Rossetti, conversely, remained utterly impenitent. She received her sentence with a sneer. She peremptorily rejected all religious solace and the sacraments.

The man arrived at the scaffold utterly undone by fear, barely able to stand on his own two feet. The impenitent woman, exercising her right to go first, was the first to place her head beneath the blade, having first cast a look of supreme contempt upon her accomplice.

The emotion stirred within the crowd witnessing the execution was immense, indescribable. Many women, and indeed several men, wept. Others hurled curses. Yet justice ran its precise and exact course, as was its due.

Chapter XCIII

Luigi Finocchi of Corneto possessed a beautiful wife, of whom he was extremely jealous. And indeed, his Geltrude did not seem the sort to let an opportunity slip by. To her natural grace, she added a spirit of uncommon vivacity. Born into a good family, she dressed with singular elegance and possessed a decided taste for all things refined and graceful. This character of hers stood in stark contrast to that of her husband: a coarse, haughty man, utterly impervious to all those social niceties without which his "Tuta" could not live.

How, then, had such an ill-matched couple come together?

It was the usual story, or nearly so.

Through a few little whims of her own, Tuta had brought upon herself certain "consequences": consequences that had taken the form of a tiny fetus stirring within her young womb. Her mother, alerted in time, set about busily searching for a husband for her daughter, a man who could redeem the momentary error she had committed and legitimize the unborn child through marriage.

But Geltrude's conduct had already sparked rumors, and keeping such matters secret was no easy feat in a small town: a place where, for people with nothing better to do, a fly landing on the nose of a prominent figure takes on the significance of a major event.

What was needed was a man who had no habit of mingling with his peers or listening to their idle chatter. Who could be a better candidate than Luigi Finocchi: coarse, perhaps, but wealthy; a sort of bear of a man who kept to himself and associated with no one?

Tuta's good mother, having been informed that Finocchi harbored matrimonial intentions—and that her daughter had caught his fancy—immediately set about playing her hand. First and foremost, the task was to persuade Geltrude herself. And that would not have been an easy undertaking, were it not for that little being who had already begun to show signs of life within his mother's womb.

Tuta proved to be reasonable, and thus, on that front at least, the matter was swiftly made possible.

There remained the other party. And even with her, arranging the matter proved no difficult task.

A friend of Tuta's took charge of the undertaking. She knew Finocchi and had had dealings with him in the past. Under some pretext or another, she went to visit him; and once conversation had begun —chatting about this and that—she eventually remarked:

"Well, Mr. Giggi! Do you still go on living like a bear, always all alone?"

"Better alone than in bad company," Finocchi replied.

"True enough; but a prudent man like yourself could easily find good company, if he wanted to. Why don't you take a wife?"

"It's a risky business; you never know where you might land."

"So, in principle, you aren't opposed to marriage?"

"I've never really given it much thought."

"A beautiful and virtuous wife is a sweet comfort, a useful and cherished companion."

"The hard part is precisely finding one who is both beautiful and virtuous: two qualities that generally tend to be mutually exclusive."

"It's certainly difficult, but not impossible. I, for instance, would be willing to take it upon myself to find you one."

"You?"

"Why not? If one isn't capable of doing a favor for a friend, one is useless in this world. Do you know the Montinis?"

"That widow who has a beautiful daughter?"

"Precisely."

"I know them only by sight. But the girl strikes me as a rather haughty creature."

"She is both good and beautiful."

"Beautiful, certainly; as for 'good'…"

"I'll personally vouch for her: she is a gem; a little dove, a very lily of purity and innocence."

"Who knows what sort of notions might be swirling around in her head!"

"Sensible, down-to-earth notions."

"Do you really think so?"

"Believe it? I know it for a fact! She was raised by a mother who—and I say this without boasting—is just like me: strict, rigid, uncompromising. Oh! Tuta has no silly notions in her head.

"Her name is Geltrude; I know that much.

"My friend! Unless I'm mistaken, you've already set your sights on her."

"I wouldn’t go quite that far. But she would suit me…"

"To a T, isn’t that it? Leave it to me; if you like her, I’ll handle everything."

"It’ll be a waste of time. A girl like that will want a dandy, a stylish young man for a husband."

"I assure you, she won’t. You are a man in the prime of life: sturdy, vigorous."

"In those respects, I fear no rivals."

"And you have plenty of money."

"Thanks be to God and my own hard work, I have enough to light my way along the path of life."

"You won’t have any impossible demands, will you?"

"Such as?"

"Geltrude was raised in a refined manner; it would pain her to have to change her way of dressing."

"And who would ask her to do that? I like her just as she is. Why should she change? I’m certainly not short on cash, and I’d love to deck her out in gold and jewels."

"Oh! She won’t expect anything like that; her father left very little behind, and that little has been steadily dwindling away. She has no dowry."

"I’m not looking for one."

"As for her mother…"

"If what she has left isn’t enough for her, I’m ready to provide her with an allowance."

"She won’t ask for much."

"However, I don’t want her living in my house. My late father—God rest his soul—always told me: 'Beware of mothers-in-law!'"

"Tuta’s mother is a respectable woman…"

"No, no! *Vade retro, Satana*[xxxvii]! I want no mothers-in-law!"

"Let me finish, *compare*[xxxviii] Giggi."

"Go right ahead: but as for taking a mother-in-law into my home? Not for all the gold in the world."

"I was saying that Signora Montini is a decent woman, and that—for the sake of her daughter’s well-being—she will consent to part ways with her."

"Well, at last! On that point, we see eye to eye."

"I’ll speak to Tuta’s mother about it this very day."

"I'd prefer you first sounded out the girl's feelings on the matter."

"Leave that to me; have no doubt."

Finocchi thrust his hands into his waistcoat pockets, drew out two gold Napoleons, and slipped them into the hands of the obliging *comare*[xxxix], saying:

"These are for the initial expenses. On the wedding day, I'll give you a couple of dozen more."

"Thank you, *compare*. It's a deal."

Chapter XCIV

The wedding took place with great pomp. Luigi Finocchi seemed to have cast aside all his wildness, having shown his betrothed the most exquisite courtesies.

It is a phenomenon that occurs often: the sun of love illuminates even the most clouded minds and awakens sentiments of incomparable delicacy in souls that appear utterly insensitive and coarse. Giggi already loved Geltrude passionately, and no sacrifice would have seemed too great to him if it meant winning her love in return. Yet he felt she was far above him. He felt so inferior to her, so utterly despairing of ever rising to her level, that he would have welcomed with pleasure any event, however painful, that might have diminished the hypothetical distance separating them.

With a delicate gesture, Finocchi had insisted that the wedding festivities take place at the Montini home, even though he himself defrayed all the expenses. When the dancing, which had followed the sumptuous dinner, came to an end, the guests departed. The newlyweds then made their way to their own residence, escorted to the very threshold by Tuta's mother and other relatives. Having taken their leave, they finally found themselves alone. The psychological moment was drawing near: Giggi led his beloved to the door of the bedroom, which he had furnished with both opulence and good taste, and then withdrew for a moment to allow her to complete her nightly toilette in privacy.

Just then, a servant brought him a letter, saying:

"Sir, this note was delivered early this very morning, with instructions to hand it to you immediately. But I did not wish to disturb you."

"You did well."

The servant withdrew, and Finocchi slipped the letter into his pocket, intending to read it the following day. But then, to kill time and quell his impatience, he took it out and glanced at the address: *Signor Luigi Finocchi, Corneto. Most Urgent*. A businessman first and foremost, he received that most urgent missive; he opened it, read it, turned pale, and had to lean against a piece of furniture to keep from falling.

He entered the bridal chamber, having made a desperate effort to master his emotion, and handed the letter to his bride, saying:

"Read this."

Wrapped in a thin, white dressing gown that fell in close folds down her figure—superbly beautiful, outlining her curves, at once voluptuous and graceful—with the rosy, quivering flesh of her rounded shoulders, her high, firm bosom, and her magnificent arms visible beneath the sheer, diaphanous fabric, Geltrude was a divine sight, enough to tempt even a saint. But Luigi Finocchi's head was aflame; a crimson surge rose to his eyes, and he could perceive nothing but a vast, blinding field of red before him.

Geltrude read the letter calmly, serenely, as if it concerned matters that had nothing to do with her; and when she had finished, she uttered a single word, yet with such an accent of supreme contempt that it shook her husband to the very core:

"Coward!"

"So it is true?" asked Finocchi, his voice taking on an inflection that sounded like a death rattle.

"Yes," Geltrude replied, her voice steady, yet filled with silent despair.

"Well, then?" her husband demanded breathlessly.

"I deceived you; I am unworthy of you. Cast me out: you have every right to do so."

"Why deceive me?" Luigi asked, his voice filled with heart-wrenching anguish.

"To save my honor. I carry within my womb the fruit of my sin: if, indeed, it can be called a sin for an innocent girl to have allowed herself to be seduced by a scoundrel." That frank confession—filled with regret and resignation—struck the unfortunate man deeply; it came as a true solace to him. He regained his composure and assessed the situation dispassionately.

He had been deceived; yet the end goal, if it did not justify the deception, at least excused it. The young woman had fallen prey to the machinations of a scoundrel: she was a victim to be pitied rather than condemned. Moreover, could he truly have imagined that such a treasure of grace and beauty had been created for him: a man so rough, coarse, and unrefined? He had longed for the distance separating him from Geltrude to be halved; and here, now, was the very turn of events that granted his wish. If the young woman did not love her seducer, he would forgive her; he would cherish her with all his love, all his adoration. She had been sincere up until this moment; why, then, would she cease to be so now? He gazed into Geltrude's eyes, and she appeared to him as an angelic, celestial vision. His mind had never before been able to conceive of such beauty. He took her fair, delicate hand, and a tremor ran through every fiber of his being.

"Geltrude!" he said—his voice imbued with a tenderness that seemed to contradict his very physical appearance—"do you love that man?"

"I hate him! I detest him! I wish I could plunge a dagger into his heart with my own hands."

As she spoke thus, the young woman’s flashing black eyes seemed to emit sparks; her red lips quivered; a deep furrow had formed on her brow; the swollen veins in her temples throbbed; and her voice bore the unmistakable stamp of truth.

"Is your transgression known to anyone else?"

"Only to my mother."

"Is he from Corneto?"

"No, he is a traveling salesman who comes here two or three times a month and never stays longer than forty-eight hours."

"When will he arrive?"

"He must be here... for he has written to you: this infamous letter, which revealed my guilt to you, is in his own hand."

"What if I were to kill him...?"

"I would worship you like a god!" Geltrude exclaimed with a surge of passion, encircling his neck with her bare arms, which emerged from the wide sleeves of her dressing gown.

At that touch, Luigi felt intoxicated to the point of delirium; he pressed the beautiful woman powerfully against his chest, and, tilting her head back, planted a long kiss upon her lips.

Those four lips burned like glowing embers.

Then, abruptly, he broke free from the embrace, which Geltrude had passionately returned, and declared resolutely:

"No: first, vengeance."

"I want to witness it."

"You shall."

Chapter XCV

"Where did you meet?" Luigi Finocchi asked Geltrude the following morning, as he entered the bedroom where he had left her alone the previous night to uphold his stern resolve.

"At a little cottage by the sea, just a few steps from the city. It belongs to a deaf old woman who rented it out to him."

"Fetch a pen, paper, and ink, and write to him."

"Why?"

"To arrange a meeting."

"I understand; very well. I'm ready."

Finocchi began to dictate while Geltrude wrote:

Arturo,

Your denunciation was an act of cowardice; I attribute it to jealousy, and I forgive it. He left last night. Nor do I know what will become of him. I need to see you. Write back, via the bearer, to let me know if I can find you at our usual spot.

Tuta

Once the letter was finished and addressed, Giggi took it and left, entrusting it to one of his most faithful servants for delivery. When he returned to Geltrude, he had the reply. It read:

My Angel,

Forgive me! You have guessed the sentiment that drove me. Come; I await you this evening. I grieve that I have but one life with which to atone for the infamy I have committed. It is little, but it is entirely yours.

Arturo

"One life is enough!" said Finocchi after hearing Geltrude read it aloud. "Isn't that so?"

"Yes, provided he remains silent forever."

It was eleven o'clock that night when Tuta knocked at the door of her former lover's cottage. The night was dark and stormy. The sky was blanketed in dense black clouds, broken every now and then by the glare of lightning. Not a living soul was to be seen anywhere around. The old, deaf tenant woman did not live in the little house; it was nothing more than a hunter's *pied-à-terre*[xl], consisting of a single ground-floor room that served simultaneously as kitchen and dining area, and an upper chamber where the beds for resting and sleeping were kept. From this upper room, by pulling a slender chain, one could lift the latch that secured the cottage door.

No sooner had Tuta knocked than the latch lifted and the door swung open. Geltrude entered, leaving it ajar. Almost simultaneously, a man stepped out of the shadows and slipped into the cottage behind her.

It was Luigi Finocchi.

"Geltrude, aren't you coming up?" called a voice from the room above.

"I have no light," the woman replied.

"Ah! Forgive me. I'm coming down."

Almost immediately, a light appeared at the top of the wooden staircase—which led from the dining area to the upper floor—and the elegant figure of Arturo emerged, still dressed in full evening attire.

The young man descended slowly, fully expecting Geltrude to be coming up to meet him. But to his great surprise, he found her standing motionless at the foot of the stairs.

"Are you angry, then?" the dashing young man asked her once he reached the dining area, seizing her hand and attempting to pull her toward him.

But at that very moment, a terrible blow to the neck sent him crashing to the floor. The blade of Luigi Finocchi's dagger had horribly slashed his throat, severing his jugular and extinguishing his life. The lamp he had been carrying slipped from his grasp and went out. Giggi picked it up and relit it. Then he bent over the murdered man to ensure he was dead. Geltrude watched him impassively; not a single muscle in her face betrayed the slightest emotion, nor did the complexion of her beautiful, delicate, oval face change in the slightest.

"We must get rid of this corpse; it could land us in trouble with the law: and with each other, too."

"Let's set fire to the cottage; the body will burn along with it, and everyone will assume it was a freak accident."

"No, that would be too risky. It’s a stormy night, and a hellish wind is blowing; the fire could spread and cause serious damage if no one arrives in time to put it out. And if they *do* spot it quickly and manage to bring it under control, they’ll find the charred remains; they’ll look for a motive, launch an investigation, and perhaps make some discoveries."

"So, what do we do?"

"We have to throw him into the sea. The water is rough right now; it will carry him away, God knows where."

Without another word, Luigi Finocchi hoisted Arturo’s corpse onto his shoulders and headed out the door. Geltrude extinguished the lamp and followed him, closing the door gently behind her so that the latch would catch and lock it tight.

Upon reaching the sea, Finocchi lowered the murdered man from his shoulders, rifled through his pockets, and retrieved the letter Geltrude had written to him that very morning. Then, lifting the body into his arms, and balancing it for a moment to gather his strength and give the throw greater momentum, he hurled it into the water. The woman, standing behind him, unflinching as ever, watched the scene unfold, made all the more terrifying by the darkness of the night.

Chapter XCVI

Arturo had not traveled to Corneto on business, but solely because he had been summoned there by the news of Geltrude's marriage; consequently, he carried with him nothing more than a small valise of personal effects. The deaf old woman was not surprised by his unannounced disappearance. She felt a pang of regret at not receiving the rent payment when it fell due (as was customary) and at no longer seeing him; yet she spoke of it to no one. The sea, having swallowed its prey, had borne it away to who knows where; thus, no trace of the crime remained: a crime that stayed hidden, thereby allowing Finocchi and Geltrude to savor the delights of a honeymoon, crimson with blood, yet no less delectable.

It is a phenomenon noted by many physiologists: that blood shed for the sake of love heightens the passion and pleasure shared between accomplices. That spirited, gentle creature, Geltrude, had come to love her coarse husband with a frenzied intensity, having witnessed him commit, for her sake, the murder of the young man who had seduced her. For his part, Luigi Finocchi was so gratified by his vengeance—and by the intoxicating rapture he derived from his marriage—that he would have done it all over again, had the opportunity presented itself.

"Do you love me?" he would often ask his woman amidst the delirium of their embraces.

"I adore you. To possess you, it seems a small price to have killed a man."

"Let us leave those memories behind," Geltrude would reply faintly, betraying not the slightest repugnance; on the contrary, she would mentally reconstruct the terrible drama she had witnessed and abetted, drawing fresh sensual arousal from that very recollection.

"Do they trouble you? They don't trouble me," Luigi would rejoin. "The more I dwell on them, the greater my joy."

"Mine, too."

"If anyone were to attempt to take you from me, I would feel capable of any slaughter—of anything at all—save for letting you go." These morbid excitations and the husband's repeated declarations eventually reawakened the wife's capricious nature and kindled within her a sharp craving for new and sinful pleasures. Although her conduct as a wife had, until that moment, been irreproachable—having made people forget the fickle temperament she possessed as a spinster—there

was no shortage of drones buzzing around her, eager to sip the honey of kisses from her dewy lips. Yet Geltrude met them with the utmost indifference.

For some time, Luigi Finocchi had been maintaining mysterious contacts with the outside world.

An insurrection had broken out in Sicily. Garibaldi, having set sail from Genoa with a thousand volunteers, had successfully landed in Sicily; joined by a multitude of insurgents, and having fought bloody battles against the Bourbon troops, they had seized control of the entire island, overthrowing its legitimate government. The revolution sought to spread further, seeking adherents even within the States of His Holiness through emissaries who scattered money with open hands. Finocchi's greed, exacerbated by the exorbitant expenses his wife incurred, fell prey to this temptation; he threw himself headlong into the conspiracy.

It appeared that a landing was being planned along the Pontifical coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, and toward this end, Finocchi and his new associates were hard at work. His absences from home were frequent, occurring both by day and by night, and at times would last for as long as a week. He claimed he was traveling to Grosseto, in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany: a state whose Grand Duke had himself been ousted from his throne the previous year. And indeed, he did travel there, though always with clandestine political objectives.

One night, he returned home in the company of a young man. The servants had already retired for the night, and Giggi called out to Geltrude, who had already withdrawn to her bedroom but was still up, asking her to prepare something to eat for himself and his mysterious companion.

"Would you like me to wake the maid?"

"No; the stranger must not be seen by anyone."

"I can offer you nothing but cold food."

"It matters not. Your mere presence will suffice to cheer my companion, and the food you serve him will seem all the more delicious."

The woman smiled at her husband's compliment and descended to the dining room, where the stranger had remained. Giggi had already spoken to her of his exploits and his associates. She therefore expected to find herself standing before a bearded brigand wearing a sugarloaf hat, goatskin breeches, and leather sandals on his feet. She was, consequently, quite astonished to see instead an elegant and courteous gentleman who, the moment he caught sight of her, rose, stepped forward to meet her, and said:

"I am deeply sorry, Madam, to cause you such inconvenience; I would not have consented to do so were it not for the gracious insistence of my friend Luigi."

"My husband's friends," replied Geltrude, pleasantly surprised and eager to show herself no less gracious and refined, "are always welcome, and our humble home is entirely at their disposal."

"Thus speak the charming women of Italy!" the stranger exclaimed with emphasis, adding (with an air that was half preacher, half apostle):

"When we have liberated the Fatherland from the Alps to the sea, having destroyed the tyrannies and overthrown the government of the priests, it will be a coveted prize for those who have not lost their lives in this arduous undertaking to receive their reward from your beautiful hands. The Clelias, the Virginias, and the Cornelias of Rome will teach our children the path of sacrifice and glory."

This language, which might perhaps have made another woman smile, profoundly impressed Geltrude, who was always inclined toward the extraordinary and the transcendental. She bowed with a smile, offering no reply for fear of proving herself unequal to her interlocutor, and went into the kitchen to prepare supper.

Chapter XCVII

The meal was frugal, consisting of cold dishes, yet washed down with a generous, cheerful, and lively wine. The stranger, having shed the initial air of academic gravity he had assumed merely to strike a pose, revealed himself to be a delightful dining companion, witty and jovial. He gave a brilliant account of the events of the Sicilian campaign, in which he had taken part, and expounded upon the intentions of Garibaldi, who sought to unify Italy. Yet, he remained tight-lipped regarding his own mission, as well as his dealings with Finocchi.

Geltrude felt captivated by the conspirator's insinuating manner of speech; he let no opportunity pass to interweave compliments directed at her into his conversation, casting glances her way that were laden with unspoken suggestion: glances to which she responded, at first somewhat timidly, but gradually with increasing boldness and candor.

The capricious woman could not help but draw a comparison between her husband—coarse and brutish in both person and manner—and this stranger: a man schooled in all the refinements of city life: handsome, elegant, cultured, and eloquent. Before the table was cleared, the act of marital infidelity had, on her part, already been spiritually consummated.

The stranger was assigned a small room adjoining the hosts' own bedroom, a space that typically served as Geltrude's dressing room. Aided by her husband, the wife—already unfaithful in spirit—transformed it into a miniature Eden, replete with every comfort: a soft bed with pristine white sheets and downy pillows, redolent of lavender and iris.

Upon entering, the stranger was pleasantly surprised; he lavished them with thanks, gave Finocchi a hearty, English-style handshake, and lightly touched the tips of Geltrude's fingers, a gesture to which she responded with an equally eloquent and intense pressure. Conspirators are all alike: they find hospitality in a home, and the first thing they do—should a comely female figure appear before them—is to violate her, taking advantage of the sway that mystery and danger hold over weak-willed female hearts.

The very next day, a dispatch arrived for the Commissioner of Corneto from the Roman police, warning him that a notorious conspirator was expected to arrive in town. He was urged to keep him under surveillance in order to identify the individuals with whom he might establish contact, and to arrest him the moment he prepared to depart.

When it comes to political matters, generally speaking, the police are invariably informed twenty-four hours after the fact.

The Police Commissioner hastened to share this news with his inner circle; consequently, in the blink of an eye, the entire town of Corneto was apprised of the situation, Luigi Finocchi first among them. It was therefore agreed that the stranger would remain confined within his hiding place. Geltrude would take it upon herself to provide him with every necessity until, once the initial surge of police zeal had subsided, the authorities would calm down, making it possible to arrange his departure—under cover of darkness—aboard some coastal trading vessel bound for neighboring Tuscany.

The conspirator's voluntary confinement lasted but three days: Luigi was constantly away from home, out scouting the terrain and gathering intelligence. His wife and the handsome young man thus had ample time to weave their own little (albeit spicy) romantic intrigue. Within twelve hours, the stranger, though he had not yet embarked upon the conquest of the Papal States, had already successfully conquered the wife of his host.

All was now in readiness for the conspirator's departure when Luigi Finocchi returned home unexpectedly and headed toward Geltrude's bedroom.

The sound of a kiss, given and returned, froze him, petrified, just beyond the threshold of the adjoining room. Struck by a jealous suspicion, he bent down and peered through the keyhole.

The stranger was leaving the bedroom, and his wife—clad in a white dressing gown—was escorting him, her arms wrapped around him. They exchanged kisses and tender caresses. They were bidding each other their final farewells.

"So, I shall never see you again, my love?" Geltrude asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"We shall meet again as soon as the fortunes of our country allow. But if I am destined to die on the battlefield, it will be with your likeness held against my heart and your name upon my lips."

The poor, cuckolded husband, witnessing and hearing all this, bit his hands in desperation and wept in a fit of rage.

He longed to fling open the door, to hurl himself upon the treacherous pair, and to strangle them both with his own bare hands. But instantly, another thought seized him: to denounce the traitor and exact his vengeance upon his wife. He withdrew swiftly, yet failed to observe the necessary precautions. The sound of his footsteps alerted Geltrude. She rushed to the window overlooking the street and saw Giggi bursting through the front door, bareheaded and running like a madman.

"We've been discovered! Flee!" she cried out to the stranger. "My husband saw us in each other's arms!"

"Let us flee!"

"Impossible. I shall stay. I will face his wrath alone, and I will appease it," she added with an enigmatic smile.

Chapter XCVIII

The conspirator wasted no time in argument; his foremost concern was saving his own skin. He followed Geltrude, who escorted him to the garden behind the house and showed him the escape route over a low garden wall so that he might reach the waterfront by a different path. Meanwhile, Luigi Finocchi was making his way to the police station. But before crossing the threshold, he paused to reflect for a moment, and that was enough to turn him away from his infamous intent.

He retraced his steps: he had changed his mind. He would kill the man who had violated the hospitality granted him under his own roof—just as he had killed Geltrude's seducer—and, like him, he would cast him into the sea. After all, the fault was his own, for he had placed fire right next to the haystack. He did not want to lose his wife, nor forgo her embraces. The death of her lover would be sufficient punishment for her. He had told her so many times: *Whoever attempts to steal your caresses from me shall die*.

He returned home, armed himself with the knife he had used to slit Arturo's throat, and went straight to the bedroom; there he found Geltrude, slumped half-fainting in a chair. He seized her by the arm and said:

"Come and see how the guilty—the traitors—are punished."

And he dragged her violently into the study, where he believed the stranger was still hiding. But when he found the room empty, he was seized by a paroxysm of rage.

"Where is he?" he bellowed at his wife, his voice choked with fury. "Where is he, you slut; where is your lover?"

"He's gone," Geltrude murmured, more dead than alive.

"Gone? Fled? And all thanks to you?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then; *you* shall pay the price for him!" And as he uttered these words, he seized her by the hair, dragged her to the small bed, and—with the formidable blade of his knife—severed her head.

Then he leaned out the window, screaming like a madman:

"*Here she is! Here she is!*"

Still clutching it by the hair, he displayed the severed head of Geltrude, from whose neck blood was still gushing in torrents.

That terrible spectacle sent the few passersby fleeing in terror. But soon others arrived, and a crowd began to gather…

Finocchi continued to brandish his wife's head, shouting:

"*Here she is! Here she is!*"

Finally, the police arrived; not without difficulty, they managed to subdue the raving madman before he could inflict injury upon them with the knife he was still brandishing.

Once taken to the prison, they were forced to place him in a straitjacket to prevent him from attempting to take his own life.

However, while searching the uxorcide's home for a motive for the crime, the police discovered documents revealing his ties to revolutionary circles; through intensive investigation, they learned of the conspirator's arrival and subsequent escape. The ensuing inquiry reconstructed the tragic events, yet the defendant's unstable mental state made it impossible to fully clarify the facts.

Luigi Finocchi was sentenced to the supreme penalty, and five days later, I was summoned to carry out the sentence.

Word of the condemned man's wretched mental state had spread far and wide, and there was talk of a plot the revolutionaries intended to execute in an attempt to snatch him from the gallows. Consequently, a substantial detachment of troops was brought in from Rome to prevent any untoward incidents.

On the morning of July 21st, Corneto appeared to be under military occupation. As we emerged from the prison, the cart—upon which sat two friars charged with comforting the condemned man, alongside myself and the patient (who, though still alive, had lost all awareness of his surroundings)—was encircled by the Carabinieri.

Upon reaching the foot of the scaffold, we lifted him down and carried him bodily up the steps, for he was unable to stand on his own.

"They are executing a dead man!" cried one voice.

"Murderers!" echoed another.

In an instant, the uproar became general. Whistles deafened our ears. Yet the scaffold was too heavily guarded for there to be any cause for alarm.

While I carried out the execution, the drums rolled at full force. A few arrests were made, and calm was restored.

However, my assistant and I had to be escorted back to the prison by that very same guard detail; we departed under cover of darkness, slipping away stealthily to avoid any further trouble.

Chapter XCIX

Timoteo Castroni was a young student at the University of Rome, highly esteemed for his keen intellect and for the ease with which he opened his purse—always well-stocked, as he hailed from a wealthy provincial family—to his friends.

He moved in polite society and was warmly received, thanks to his exquisite manners, the vivacity of his conversation—which was cultured, fluent, and engaging—and his uncommon physical attributes. Tall and slender of build, with a handsome oval face of that pale, slightly olive complexion that exerts such sway over the hearts of the fair sex; illuminated by two large, deep-black eyes brimming with sentiment, passion, and tenderness; with a full, sensual mouth shaded by a pair of fine, glossy black moustaches that matched his thick, curly hair; he was, truly, a handsome young man in the most absolute sense of the word. His instinctive reserve only heightened the allure he possessed. The ladies attributed it to a touch of pride (aroused, they imagined, by his early romantic conquests) and they easily became infatuated with him, eager to conquer the disdain they believed he flaunted, yet which was, in reality, entirely foreign to his nature.

Among his acquaintances—salon acquaintances, that is—there was, among others, a graceful, Romanized Frenchwoman of somewhat piquant reputation. She had fallen madly in love with Timoteo and could scarcely bear the indifference he showed her.

Yet, rather than indifference, it was fear that she inspired in him. In the presence of such superb beauty, the young student felt utterly insignificant; he dared not even raise his eyes to meet hers, for it seemed to him that she had been brought into the world solely "to display a miracle." Desire would have drawn him toward her, yet he fought strenuously within the innermost recesses of his soul against such desire, deeming it not merely reckless, but utterly senseless.

Whenever the image of that woman appeared in his dreams, he felt an inconceivable physical exhaustion, and he strove to banish her, as one would a tempting succubus. The smiles that this alluring creature lavished upon him he regarded as mockery, as cruel taunts, and rather than feeling encouraged by them, he fled from her.

One evening, at a grand ball hosted at an embassy to which Timoteo had been invited, he saw the exquisitely beautiful lady make her entrance, clad in a daring gown that highlighted every incomparable grace of her person.

She wore a white dress, cut daringly low; from its high-set waist rose her magnificent, divinely sculpted shoulders, while her bosom rose majestically amidst a froth of the finest lace. Around her neck rested a strand of black pearls of rare beauty, adding a further luster to the warm glow of her smooth skin.

Her arrival sparked murmurs of admiration all around; the most prominent figures and the most elegant young men of the Roman aristocracy crowded close to her, vying for a smile, a slight nod of the head, or a greeting.

Blanche—for that was her name—swept past with the gait of a goddess, seemingly indifferent to these tributes. Suddenly, at the far end of the ballroom, she caught sight of the young student; he was gazing at her in stupefaction, appearing utterly entranced. She chose to savor her triumph and paused just a few paces from him, conversing gaily with a dashing officer from her native land.

Timoteo found himself, as it were, besieged by that couple: a pair upon whom every eye in the room was fixed. He could not have left his post without asking their permission: and doing so seemed grotesque to him; yet remaining there, an indiscreet witness, seemed even more so.

As the lady conversed with the officer, she stole glances at Timoteo, appearing to take pleasure in his discomfort. But when she saw him turn pale—to the point where he seemed on the verge of fainting—she dismissed the officer with the air of a queen; and as the latter bowed before her, she turned swiftly and slipped her arm—that marvelous arm—beneath Timoteo's, saying:

"Take me for a stroll through the rooms. It is too hot in here; one can hardly breathe."

And she drew him along with her into a secluded cabinet, far removed, where the notes of the music, which set the dancing couples in the ballroom into a feverish whirl, reached them only faintly; where the light of a large Carcel lamp, softly tempered by rose-hued shades, lent the setting a sweetly mysterious air; where it seemed that declarations of love and kisses hovered in the warm atmosphere.

Blanche sank back onto a small red satin sofa—whose shimmering reflections made her round, bare shoulders and arms, yearning for an embrace, appear to be aflame—just as her beautiful face glowed, kindled by intense passion and an unbridled craving for voluptuousness; and she drew the young man, lost in a dreamlike trance, down beside her, asking him in a voice brimming with promise:

"Do you love me?"

Timoteo sought to kneel before her. He had not a single nerve that remained steady; a tremor ran through his lips, his voice, and his very frame.

"I adore you—like a saint upon an altar."

"Child!" exclaimed the intoxicated lady, and she silenced his lips with her own.

From that evening on, the student became her lover and lived for her alone. Summer had arrived, and after the bathing season, Blanche had been taken by her husband to a castle of his, perched high in the Abruzzo Apennines. Timoteo followed her, and every night, slipping through a secret little door for which he held the key, he would make his way into her bedroom. It did not take long for her husband to catch on. He knew Blanche's habits well. Before marrying her, he himself had been her lover, deceiving her first husband just as Timoteo was now deceiving him. Only three years had passed when the lovely lady's first spouse had died, reportedly in a hunting accident. Yet Fate, in that instance, had been aided by the hand of man. And that man was the bandit Angelo Isola. Resolved to rid himself of his rival, just as he had rid himself of the first husband, he went in search of his old accomplice and found him in a tavern in Rocca Secca, where the bandit was wont to take shelter between his various brigand exploits.

It was a tiny room—hewn, one might say, directly into the mountain itself—burrowing deep underground like a natural grotto, and divided in two by a simple wooden partition. In the section facing the street sat the patrons who dropped in for a drink; in the rear section, the cooking was done, the wine was stored, and the landlord's closest cronies would gather: the landlord himself, it was rumored, likely having a hand in the frequent robberies reported throughout the surrounding countryside. No sooner had the cuckolded husband entered than the tavern keeper doffed his cap and, bowing humbly, asked him:

"How may I be of service, Count?"

"Is Angelo here?" the visitor murmured in a hushed voice. The innkeeper, by way of reply, led him into the second room of the tavern, where the Count immediately spotted and recognized his man.

"Angelo," he said, sitting down familiarly beside him on an overturned barrel, "there's a hundred scudi to be earned. Do you need them?"

"*Pofferbacco*[xli], Count! At this time of night, for a hundred scudi, I'd scale the very heavens!"

"It involves a far easier task."

"So much the better."

"Instead of climbing up, you have to send someone tumbling down: down into the Devil's Ravine."

"He won't be the first!" the bandit observed with a sneer. "Is it another husband?"

"No, this time it's a lover."

"Then the roles have been reversed."

"Precisely. Around midnight, a young fellow—twenty years old, give or take—dressed like a tourist, will be passing that way: a sturdy little satchel slung across his shoulder and an alpenstock in his hands."

"We'll relieve him of that, just so it doesn't help him climb back up. Besides, the timing is perfect."

"No. It's better to wait for him on his return trip, toward dawn. Whoever is waiting up for him tonight, if they don't see him show up, might start to get suspicious."

"Avoiding that is a most useful precaution."

"Here are ten napoleons as an advance; you'll get the rest once the job is done."

As he spoke, the Count handed the bandit a small handful of gold coins, which the latter tossed into the hollow of his palm.

"It's a deal!" the bandit exclaimed, and the wronged husband took his leave.

The very next day, at the first glimmer of dawn, Angelo Isola was lying in ambush at the Devil's Ravine, the very spot where Timoteo was due to pass. The weather was raging; frequent flashes of lightning reddened the cloud-shrouded sky, and rain fell in a deluge. The poor student—unaware of the ambush that awaited him, and still intoxicated by kisses and caresses—hastened his steps back toward the village where he had taken up residence to be near Blanche's castle; but suddenly, two powerful arms seized him from behind, and, lifting him bodily, hurled him like a lead weight into the ravine. The ground where he landed, halfway down the precipice, was softened by the rain; thus, Timoteo was able to rise and, clinging to the rocky outcroppings, attempt to climb back up. Yet, just as he reached for a gnarled shrub, a fearsome vulture emerged from a hidden crevice; fearing an assault upon its nest, it swooped down upon him.

A terrible blow from its beak, accompanied by an equally formidable beat of its wings, sent the wretched young man plummeting to the bottom of the ravine, where he was dashed to pieces against the jutting boulders.

Angelo Isola, who had witnessed the entire scene, heaved a sigh of satisfaction and exclaimed:

"The Devil protects his own."

The student's corpse was discovered and recovered the following day. Blanche surmised the grim tragedy that had unfolded on that stormy morning, yet she made no move to avenge her lover. Angelo Isola continued his trade as a hired assassin and bandit until, in God's own time, human justice

was finally able to strike him down. Arrested, tried, and convicted, he was beheaded by my hand in Subiaco on June 11, 1864.

With this final execution Giovanni Battista Bugatti was retired from service—a measure proposed by Monsignor Fiscale, who, in his official report, referred to him as "the illustrious Bugatti." The Council of Ministers subsequently submitted the proposal to His Holiness.

Pius IX approved it on February 28 of that same year, granting him a monthly pension of 30 scudi "in consideration of his advanced age and his exceptionally long service," effective from November 1st: the very day on which he was succeeded by Vincenzo Balducci, his assistant since 1850. Balducci's executions were few in number (the most famous being the one carried out on November 24, 1868, in which the patriots Monti and Tognetti were executed, with Mastro Titta also in attendance), as the Breach of Porta Pia soon occurred, bringing his career to an abrupt end.

Giovanni Battista Bugatti did not live to witness that event; for fifteen months and two days earlier—specifically on June 18, 1869—he had passed away. His death is recorded on page 89 of Book IX of the Parish of Santa Maria in Traspontina.

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[i] One of many Catholic lay associations in Italy, characterized by their humble white garments and accompanying religious processions and similar events

[ii] Battista refers to those he is about to execute as his "patients"

[iii] The "captain of justice", named after the barigildus or fortified tower in which he was traditionally located, analogous to a modern sheriff

[iv] "At the point of death"

[v] Formed in 1613, this group was founded to provide burial for the poor. They have since taken on other death-related duties, as seen here

[vi] Full title: "Miserere mei, Deus" or "Have mercy on me, O God", a setting of Psalm 51 in 9-part polyphony

[vii] A southern Italian cheese, made from cow or sheep milk, similar in taste to provolone

[viii] Given that burrini is a well known type of cheese, this may refer to dairymaids bringing milk into the city

[ix] The Peacock Inn

[x] Italian currency was not well standardized at this time, and how this value would translate varies widely depending on how you do it, but €1,000 is a pretty good ballpark figure

[xi] Feast day commemorating the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child, observed Jan. 6

[xii] That is, the second half of his first hundred executions, so number 51

[xiii] A ground-level floor, or first floor in America

[xiv] Chicken cacciatore, a tomato-based stew with chicken thighs, herbs, pancetta and olives

[xv] An Italian red wine that takes its name form the Latin *sanguis Jovis*, or "Blood of Jupiter"

[xvi] The Seahorse

[xvii] A low value coin, between 12 and 20 pence, phased out in the mid-19th century with the advent of the lira

[xviii] Gold ducat, worth about 7 lire when originated in 13th century. The modern meaning derives from these coins being stitched to women's clothing to serve as decoration.

[xix] Lit. "while living", referring to actions taken/gifts given while still alive, as opposed to bequeathing upon death

[xx] Short for *ducato de zecca*, ducat of the (gold) mint. Zecchini eventually became 'Sequin'.

[xxi] Region in Italy known for natives wearing *ciocia*, rough shoes made of rough leather soles tied to the leg by straps

[xxii] Speaking of compulsive jerks… -*Ed.*

[xxiii] A white wine originating in Montefiascone. According to legend, it derives its name from a bishop's servant who, sent ahead of his master to sample the wines in the region, would write "est" ("it is": figuratively, "this one") or "non est" where his master could see it.

[xxiv] Night light

[xxv] Also known as an escritoire, a writing desk, usually with a built-in bookcase

[xxvi] Sadly, could not find a translation for this word. Though one may guess. -*Ed.*

[xxvii] Umbrella term for killing any parent

[xxviii] Pre-metric measurement of land, containing approx. 600 square meters, or 0.15 acres

[xxix] Probably Civitavecchia stuffed pizza, a traditional street food with anchovies, parsley, garlic, mozzarella, and chili peppers, with a top crust enclosing the ingredients for convenient eating

[xxx] The right to use another's property (often land) and the benefits of it. From usus and fructus, "Use (the) fruits"

[xxxi] Emperor Claudius' third wife, infamous for her alleged voracious sexual appetite and the many people who found themselves dead due to her machinations; it must be noted that the sources for this reputation are not beyond question but may be at least partially from after-the-fact political bias.

[xxxii] Also known as Cockaigne, a mythical land where no one had to work and food fell form the sky; a modern equivalent would be the Big Rock Candy Mountain

[xxxiii] An Italian dessert wine, originating in Tuscany and noted for its distinctive amber hue

[xxxiv] A red wine made from grapes grown on the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius. The name, "Tears of Christ", comes from the legend that Christ wept over Lucifer's fall from heaven, and his tears gave divine inspiration to the vines that grew there

[xxxv] A young male who was the sexual partner of an adult man in a pederastic relationship

[xxxvi] Temple dancer

[xxxvii] "Get back, Satan!" an exorcism formula often used colloquially in the sense of "don't tempt me!"

[xxxviii] Lit. Godfather, often used in the context of friend or comrade

[xxxix] Lit. godmother, more generally: old woman (usually as a term of affection)

[xl] Lit: "Foot on the ground", a residence other than one's primary one

[xli] Variant of "perbacco", "By Bacchus!", a minor Italian oath meaning roughly ‘good heavens!’ or ‘for goodness’ sake’ or similar